

# *Sea Creatures of the Southern Deep*

A novel by

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# Acknowledgements

This novel is dedicated to my parents.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor J.M. Coetzee, for his unerring insight; and my friends and family for their encouragement, patience and blind faith.

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# Synopsis

This dissertation consists of a short novel, *Sea Creatures of the Southern Deep*, accompanied by a preface.

In the preface, I discuss some aspects of my own experience that have influenced the text. I also outline the development of the manuscript, illustrating the process of revision with excerpts from drafts of the novel.

The novel itself is an account of a woman's loss and eventual recovery of a childhood vitality and sense of self. The story follows a protagonist, Anna (initially Joanna), from fearless childhood through troubled youth to adulthood. Through this narrative, I examine themes of loss, desire and identity within sexual and non-sexual relationships.

After an opening passage describing an episode in childhood, the story finds Joanna at high school. Her ambivalent friendship with a classmate, Leah, and infatuation with a teenage boy, Robbie, are described. This section culminates in Robbie's drowning and Leah's disappearance.

Subsequently, Joanna / Anna attends art school, where she starts an intense relationship with an older man, Alan. Her almost voyeuristic fascination with Alan is mirrored by her job photographing animals at the aquarium. Throughout, the sea and sea creatures signify those things that Anna both desires and fears.

Leah returns, moves in with Anna, and eventually seduces Alan. Anna takes revenge by creating a photographic collage; through this act she symbolically "kills" her lover. In doing so, she frees herself from a damaging relationship, and is able to re-enter her life rejuvenated.

# Preface

*Being a reflection upon possible influences and contexts, and upon the process of composition and revision that has taken place in the production of the creative text.*

## INTRODUCTION

Perhaps all first novels are autobiographical to some degree. While *Sea Creatures of the Southern Deep* is not my story in terms of actual incident, its themes are very personal to me. Emotionally and in some details of her life Anna is close to me (although her parents and other significant persons bear little resemblance to my own). Certainly, the story is set very firmly in my time and place: Anna was born at the same time as I was, in my city; we grew up and went to school and university in parallel. The landscape, both physical and psychological, that she moves through is my own. Thus the context of writing is the context of my life; the book's influences are those many things that have shaped me personally. To discuss these things is a very personal act, and quite daunting.

Nonetheless, in the first section – *Influences and Contexts* – I will attempt to pick out a few important experiences that I think have left their mark on the text. In the second section – *Composition and Revision* – I recount the various revisions and transformations that the text has been through to get to its final form.

Not having an academic background in English literature, I cannot provide an element of critical theory in this discussion. I can simply describe how certain aspects of my life find expression in Anna's story.

Perhaps this document will cast a different light onto the text, or perhaps it may be interesting in its own right. Whatever the case, I would prefer this essay to be read after the reader has finished the novel: its insights should not colour an initial reaction to the story. Furthermore, much of the discussion assumes a basic knowledge of the content of the novel.

## I. INFLUENCES AND CONTEXTS

In this section, I attempt to contextualise the novel by recounting various experiences that I feel influenced its production and content. I discuss particularly aspects of my own childhood and youth, the role of creative expression, animals as personal symbols, my interactions with the physical environment of Cape Town, and some writers that have influenced me stylistically.

### *Childhood and adolescence*

I remember my own transition from childhood to adolescence with a certain sense of loss. For me, the shift was from an idealised state of untrammelled energy and self-assurance – which I characterise as “wildness”, such as animals possess – to a state of insecurity. It is this sense of loss that fuelled the writing of this book. I wanted to tell the

story of a woman – not me, but someone who reflects aspects of myself – experiencing a similar loss, and ultimately finding a way to regain her “wildness.”

The opening passage of the book establishes the character of Joanna in childhood – before adolescence and her descent from primitive grace. She is depicted as a fearless, intensely emotional child, with a vivid imagination, a flair for creative expression (she draws and acts out her fantasies), a strongly felt connection with her natural environment, a certain self-involvement, and, perhaps most importantly, an affinity for things wild, fierce and free. She is dynamic, not static: like the sharks, she never wants to stop moving. All these characteristics are significant in the development of Joanna’s (later Anna’s) mature personality.

Her dynamism later becomes subdued and warped by shyness, insecurity and the many pressures of adolescence and the school environment. She devotes her energy to the obsessive observation of others – so much so that at her lowest she imagines herself to be nothing more than a “pair of eyes”.

Specifically, we find her attention focused on her friend, Leah, and on an older boy, Robbie. She is infatuated with both; both possess a precocious sexuality and physical confidence that Joanna feels she lacks. Her own discomfort with her physicality is evident, particularly in contrast to the graceful, sexually promiscuous Leah. Her feelings towards Leah are ambiguous, envious and shy, while her infatuation with Robbie is intense, paralysing and possessive. Leah is in some sense Joanna’s alter ego: she is all the things Joanna wishes to be. While she resents Leah’s sexual contact with Robbie, she also vicariously thrills to it: Leah is her emissary into the mysterious world of sexuality housed in the school toolshed.



Thus all Joanna's intense emotional energy becomes channelled into a voyeuristic fascination with Leah and Robbie. She is transfixed by the actions of these desired others – who, unlike herself, are active participants in the “motion of the world.”

After Robbie dies and Leah leaves the school, Joanna is left numb and bitter, with an unrequited romantic passion, a dread of the sea, and a memory of a witchlike murderous Leah. She drifts through the rest of high school unresponsively, “like a ghost”; her one positive act is to make a collage commemorating the dead boy. This first picture hints at her later experimentation with photographic images.

This section of the book is the most straightforwardly autobiographical, both in its emotional tone and in its description of a suburban white Cape Town high school in the eighties. Certainly Joanna's experiences reflect to some degree my own adolescence. This emotionally volatile period of personal development must count as a strong influence shaping the narrative.

## *Solitude*

Joanna / Anna has a solitary nature. She is self-absorbed, quite shy, and generally finds it difficult to relate to other people. Her solitude is at times a flaw and a source of pain; at other times it is a strength, allowing contemplation and creativity. This quality manifests early on, in the description of Joanna as a child, playing alone. Her solitude does not appear a failing or weakness; rather Joanna's imaginative life seems bold and self-sufficient.

In adolescence, however, she develops a real sense of alienation from others. Her self-absorption does not allow her to connect intimately with other people, however badly

she aches for true interaction. Other people exist as mystifying aliens, objects of uncomprehending awe or obstacles to contentment. Her closest relationship at school is her ambiguous and guarded friendship with Leah. Leah is a kindred spirit, similarly outcast, experiencing perhaps even greater loneliness – but choosing to deal with it quite differently. Leah's sense of frustrated communication is channelled into promiscuous sexual contact.

Teachers and other adults do not feature as significant beings. Joanna's only other human contact of any importance at school is with Robbie – which can hardly be described as contact at all, consisting of mute infatuation so potent that it barely allows her to speak to him. The only real interaction occurs on Robbie's last drunken night – when she must half-assume Leah's identity to communicate at all – and is met with the ultimate denial of communication, death.

After school, her social skills do not improve – at art school, her solitude becomes chronic and defiant. She is irretrievably distant from her classmates and from all human contact. Although Joanna (now called Anna) starts an affair with Alan, it is not on a profoundly communicative level – their relationship, though intense, is physical, sexual, visual, and intellectually superficial. It is also distinctly one-way: her appreciation of him is again that of a watcher, filled with much the same awe and incomprehension that she might feel watching a beautiful creature from some other species. She has no real understanding of what goes on inside his damaged skull; she cannot even make sense of his dreams – they seem to unfold in a different universe to her own. Alan is an object of beauty, possessing that animalistic quality that Anna sought in Leah and in Robbie. She perceives him in a series of surface impressions, recorded through the lens of that voyeuristic, distancing implement, the camera. When she finally ends the relationship, she leaves with no sense of who he really was, under the beautiful skin.

The suggestion of Alan's slight mental – particularly verbal – disability increases the opacity of his internal life: he is unable to adequately express his thoughts. Anna, on the other hand, is very verbal, even in introspection: she speaks to herself constantly. There is a real intellectual incompatibility. Clearly, the relationship is more sensual than cerebral, and this requires their communication to be primarily visual and tactile. (On another, more touching level, of course, the scars of Alan's near-fatal accident provoke genuine tenderness in Anna.)

For Anna, this level of communication is quite sufficient. Insecure as she still is with her own physicality, she finds Alan's physique impressive in itself – as Leah's was in an earlier time. She finds it wondrous that she is allowed to possess such a body: she examines and photographs it obsessively, endlessly, never plumbing its mystery.

When Leah re-enters her life, Anna is seduced by the prospect of real friendship, which has thus far eluded her. Both women are flawed in terms of interpersonal relationships. Both are lonely, but ill-equipped to negotiate friendship. Both respond by repeating old patterns: Leah as sexual predator and betrayer, Anna as powerless observer. Typically, Anna seeks solace in solitude – on the mountain, at work, and ultimately in the creative act. She is unable to penetrate Leah's psyche; the best she can do, ultimately, is acknowledge kinship, similarity, and a certain bitter affection.

Unavoidably, seeing the narrative through Anna's eyes, the reader is similarly denied a glimpse of Leah's – or indeed Alan's – complexities. Certainly, it was not my intention to portray Leah as a she-devil, or her precocious sexuality as wrong. While Anna might at times perceive Leah as a powerful, wicked yet magnetic figure, I hope that her ambiguity towards Leah – a mixture of hatred and longing and envy and nostalgic fondness – comes across. Leah's character could be read as an oblique homage to “bad” girls of a certain type that I went to school with: powerful, pitiful, troubled, and to me fascinating. It troubles me that she

is somewhat two-dimensional; I sense that Leah has a story to tell, and hope to revisit her character or one similar in future writing.

In short, Joanna / Anna has difficulty throughout her life in achieving real communication with people, even those most dear to her. Again, in developing this aspect of Anna's personality, I drew partly on my own experiences: alienation from peers, the occasional sense of distance and incomprehension in intimate relationships, and also the joys of contented solitude.

I do not consider a solitary nature to be a failing. Indeed, Anna achieves her triumph ultimately through self-imposed isolation, and a final creative act that she must perform alone. In the closing passage, when Anna strides out into the world, leaving her lover and her friend behind, she is still alone; but she is victorious.

### *The creative act*

An important aspect of Anna's persona is her visual creativity. Her first significant creative act, the portrait of Robbie, is an attempt to contain and order a chaotic and painful experience. She uses photographic images to control and possess the objects of her desire. Thus Robbie, the aquarium animals and of course Alan are all subjected to this process of documentation and transformation.

Anna is comfortable with the vantage point of the recording observer – after all, she has long experience in being a “pair of eyes only”. She is a passive personality finding action, power and revenge through her art; it is her way of being effective in a world that has frequently seemed to ignore or “see right through” her.

Her photography is also sexually charged, an extension of her relationship with Alan. Her photographic studies of his body are intimate and sensual documents: they are voyeuristic, ardent, obsessive, possessive. Indeed, they are the means through which she conducts much of that relationship, from the moment of meeting, through the first seduction, right up until she leaves him. When Leah appropriates her photographs and uses them for her own ends, it is thus for Anna a betrayal and theft on a very intimate and hurtful level; it is a premonition and reflection of Leah's affair with Alan.

In the scenes where Anna makes the "paper man" and symbolically kills her love, her art takes on a ritualistic physicality: she touches the pictures, cuts and tears them; she lies down naked on her creation and smears pigment on her skin. This sensual and tactile involvement is lacking in her early more clinical, voyeuristic photography. It suggests that in action, she is becoming more attuned to herself physically and mentally, more active and alive to the world and her senses. She is no longer glassed off behind the lens of the camera.

The collation of her images of Alan into a single coherent whole, whose genesis and demise she directs, is an attempt to control a relationship that has slipped from her grasp. Portrayed as a collage of surface impressions, Alan becomes at last entirely vulnerable to her. She can wreak revenge on her lover by violating him through the creative act: manipulating the photographs in a way that ritually spells out his very death. As she symbolically "resurrected" Robbie through the medium of her art, so she ultimately "kills" Alan.

After this vengeful act has been completed, Alan loses all power over her: his voice and body are no longer compelling. Anna is free to leave the humiliation and damage of the relationship; free, it is suggested, to go out into the world, leaving behind the former

objects of her gaze – her lover and her rival. She does not take her camera with her; she is now an active force in herself, no longer the eternal recorder and witness.

There are parallels between Anna's chosen form of creative expression – visual imagery – and my own, writing. Both are forms that can serve to distance the artist from the subject matter, while allowing control; certainly in my own case I have used the written form to reduce, contextualise and control fraught memories and difficult emotions. Anna's final act of creative expression, where she creates the collage of images of Alan, is analogous to my own experience of collating a number of ill-expressed chaotic recollections and impressions into a coherent piece of text.

I am also drawn to the visual in my writing; indeed, much of the impetus for writing *Sea Creatures* has come from vivid mental pictures. Such compelling “snapshots” have included: a blindingly white roofscape on top of a block of flats; a child walking far away down a grey beach; a large man in a white coat gently touching an octopus in a tank; and many more. Largely, my labour has consisted of finding a narrative to link and explicate these images, rather than creating images to illustrate a story I consciously needed to tell.

By choosing to make Anna a photographer rather than a writer herself, I am perhaps expressing my own grudging envy for an artform that is more directly visual than my own chosen medium.

## *Animals*

One of the strongest threads running through the book is the animal metaphor. Animals occur throughout the narrative as companions, comforters, messengers, in dreams, as

creatures of longing and inspiration. This heavy emphasis betrays my own interest in animals, which I hope does not veer into sentimentality. For me, animals are compelling personal symbols of virile grace and the fascinating other.

Anna feels strong sympathy with and connection to animals. As a child she imagines herself to be one of them, and for her they represent the primitive energy of childhood. In her eyes, animals live in precisely that state of “wildness” that she feels herself to have lost, and that she seeks in Leah, in Robbie, and ultimately in Alan. The aquarium is the primary site for Anna’s interactions with animals; she also crosses their paths on her solitary rambles on the mountain.

At the aquarium, Anna finds an ideal niche as observer and recorder of the underwater creatures. Her job allows her to be the consummate pair of recording eyes: here, her freedom to observe is not constrained or commented upon. The fish can only vaguely sense her presence; she is insulated from them by sheets of glass and by the gulf between species.

She observes these animals with the same shy awe that she feels for her lover; the photographs of Alan and those of the sharks are taken in much the same spirit. From the start, Alan reminds her physically of something that belongs in the water – his body is so different to her own earthbound one. This comparison is underlined by the composite pictures that she produces of Alan and the sharks and rays: they become indistinguishable, ultimately parts of the same body. All are foreign creatures under her gaze; they fascinate her, but at the same time exclude her from their thoughtless, physically confident animal world.

They are also a little threatening: Anna, once the exultant shark-child, herself one of the animals, has learnt to fear the sea and its creatures – and by implication, the wide world and its inhabitants. The sharks and rays are denizens of another, fierce universe,

alien to the sea-shy, mountain-loving Anna. This fear of the other and the unknown is reflected in her relationship to other humans, who for the large part are also alien creatures of wonder, dread and mystery. As discussed, Anna can find communication with other people difficult – almost as if they belonged to a different species, or were sealed off from her by the glass walls of an aquarium.

Earlier drafts contained many descriptive passages positively thronging with lions, tigers, rhinos, hippos, bushbabies, fish, rays, cats, crabs, dogs, octopi and chickens – evidence of my enthusiasm for animal imagery. In an attempt at restraint, this collection was eventually reduced to a smaller menagerie, with the shark as the primary metaphorical beast.

## *Cape Town*

As I have lived in Cape Town for almost all of my life, the setting and atmosphere of the novel has been inevitably determined by the environment of this city and its outlying areas. Almost all the scenes are set in real places in and around Cape Town. Some, such as the school, the aquarium and the museum, are described with a fair degree of writer's license. "Steenbaai" is a fictional amalgam of Pringle Bay, Rooiels and Betty's Bay.

Cape Town's most obvious natural features, the sea and the mountain, provide the backdrop for much of Anna's contemplation and for several significant episodes in the book. These two elements provide a symbolic opposition: the sea is an alien environment for Anna, while the mountain is "her own" landscape, and therefore safe.



My own feelings strongly inform Anna's reactions to her physical environment. The sea, for myself and for Anna, is a potent symbol of a "wide world" filled with beauty and terror. As a child, the sea is a place of excitement and wonder for Joanna; she revels in its wildness, and does not shy away from the fierceness of its creatures. Later, concurrent with her general retreat from the world, the sea becomes frightening: it is strongly associated with the death of Robbie and her own psychological decline.

The dream that Anna relates to Alan – in which she looks into the sea and sees it revealed as beautiful, magical and full of untapped wonder, rather than opaque and threatening – is important. It hints at what she still hopes the world will reveal, as well as reflecting an exhilaration in her newfound sexuality.

At the end of the story, Anna reclaims the images of the ocean and uses them to wreak her own kind of revenge. Ultimately, the final passage suggests that, with her new freedom, she has lost her fear of the sea.

In opposition to the sea is the landscape of Table Mountain. The mountain has always been a personal retreat for me, and it plays the same role for Anna. Although she has a number of such refuges, the mountain is her favourite. Like the sea, this is also a wild environment; but it is not a frightening one. Rather, it is a familiar place to meditate and hide in. Here she can be free in ways impossible in public: she is confident, tireless, and comfortable with her body as she cannot be at sea-level. When she runs and falls on the mountain, she is proud of the scratches that result – a tomboyish reaction that suggests that, alone on the mountain, she can return to a desired juvenile state. She feels integrated: one of the mountain animals, an active participant, something more than an outside observer. Other people are the intruders and outsiders here.

The mountain is then a liberatory environment, but it is also a cradle, a safe place to retreat to. Physically, it is a landscape elevated above the concerns of everyday life.

Anna's real concerns and issues lie below, in the city; she climbs the mountain when she wants to avoid encountering these things. She even contemplates, vaguely, coming to die on the mountain, imagining this to be an "acceptable" manner of death. Death, of course, is the ultimate retreat from "the motion of the world", and something that occurs frequently to Anna as an easy way out. She imagines death as untraumatic: slipping gently into sleep, alone, out of reach of the complications of life.

At the conclusion of the book, she rejects this safe way out; she turns her back on her mountain refuge, and faces the sea squarely. She chooses to be fearless, and to move forward into the world.

### *Indoor spaces*

Apart from the mountain, Anna's refuges include a number of more enclosed, interior spaces. Such secret confined spaces are also where danger and excitement dwell – the dark space of the shed at school, the shark room at the museum, Alan's workshop where their affair begins, the darkroom, the office at the aquarium. Anna is irresistibly drawn into this succession of enticing rooms.

Some of these (imaginary) rooms I have situated inside well-known Cape Town institutions: the aquarium, the museum, and to a lesser degree the national art gallery. Each of these places has very particular associations for me; the museum and gallery particularly are evocative of childhood. I vividly remember visiting the museum and the Company Gardens as a child, and to this day the museum is one of my favourite haunts.

The aquarium has a similar studious but thrilling atmosphere. In her work there, where she gains knowledge and a kind of authority, Anna comes into her own. She also establishes her domain inside her darkroom – another dim, secluded room where she has solitude and sovereignty. Such havens have been places of peace, contemplation and a certain romantic excitement for me, as they are for Anna.

### *The South African context*

*Sea Creatures* is a story told from a very narrow perspective. Little effort has been made to explicitly place Anna within the sociopolitical context of the country, or to increase the scope of the novel to encompass anything beyond Anna's immediate experiences and environment. I feel this is appropriate: Anna is a particularly self-obsessed, introspective person, circling around her own preoccupations. She can barely focus her empathy or attention on other people in her art school class, let alone on the broader sweep of humanity.

Of course, any story told in the context of South Africa in the eighties and nineties contains implicit social and political issues. My own life and sensibility as a writer has been coloured by political trauma and transformation. The oppression and political violence that characterised the country in the eighties did undoubtedly cast a shadow over those of us growing up in that era – and in a unique way over privileged white children. I don't think it is far-fetched to suggest that these stresses find some reflection in Anna's troubled psyche. The hope expressed at the end of the book – Anna's bold casting-off the old and embrace of the future – may also in some sense reflect the uncertain optimism of the South African political climate in the nineties.

## *Literary influences*

My academic background is in the biological sciences. My knowledge and enthusiasm for literature is therefore that of an interested reader, not a scholar of literature; and a discussion of literary influences can be no more than an acknowledgement of the writers I like, whose style I aspire to, and whose influence I can detect in my writing. Most of the writers mentioned, if not all of them, are writers whose works I read or re-read during the course of writing this dissertation.

Patrick White has been a formative influence. I aspire to the lush sensuality of his writing and the intensely felt internal worlds of his characters, and relate to his strong visual sense. I also admire the morality of White's books: the sense of an overriding, if idiosyncratic moral order in books such as *Voss* or *A Fringe of Leaves*. I particularly like his creation of unorthodox or eccentric heroes and villains. In Anna's world there is also very much a sense of personally defined good and evil, damnation and salvation, although I would not claim for her any explicit belief system.

Peter Carey, similarly, I admire for the controlled and insightful writing in novels such as *Bliss* and *Oscar and Lucinda*. I also enjoy the violence, wonder and transcendent emotion he perceives in mundane suburbia, and, like White, the devils and angels he finds within unlikely characters.

Because of the sustained emotional intensity and beautiful precision of his writing, Vladimir Nabokov is one of my favourite authors. I wanted my writing to evoke a state of infatuation or desire; Nabokov's *Lolita* particularly provided me with an ideal model of rapturous fiction.

I have relatively recently encountered the writing of Flannery O'Connor, notably *The Violent Bear it Away*. I enjoy the idiosyncrasy of her characters, finding them touching and grimly amusing. The compelling darkness and savage morality of her vision appeals to me, as does her harsh religion. While Anna is not religious, there is in her passions and attachments an almost religious zeal.

Another Southern American writer of the same era who I am drawn to is Carson McCullers. I first read McCullers as a child myself, and particularly admire her sensitive account of the passions and intensity of childhood, notably in *A Member of the Wedding*.

Also influential in its examination of the emotionally intense, complex and not entirely benevolent realm of adolescent girl friendships is the novel *Cat's Eye* by Margaret Atwood. Leah and Joanna's adolescent relationship bears similarities to the friendship between the young protagonist and her tormentor in *Cat's Eye*. As an adult character, Leah in her witchier moments owes a debt to Zenia in Atwood's later *The Robber Bride*. Atwood has influenced me less by her writing style than by her use of strong, contemporary female protagonists.

Ben Okri has also left his mark on my writing, particularly in my descriptions of the natural environment. His evocation of a spiritually thronging world, complete with demons and ghosts, appealed to me; I also like the vividly visual elements of his writing.

While richness and emotional intensity were my goals at the outset, one of the important lessons that I learnt during the course of this degree is that such intensity can be exhausting – for the reader more than for the writer. It requires an extraordinary talent to sustain dense passages of solid imagery for the length of a novel. Repeatedly I was required to make my writing more spare, and to clarify and simplify its structure. In this endeavour the advice of my supervisor, Professor J.M. Coetzee, has been invaluable.

I admire the discipline and elegant structure of his novels enormously, as these are the qualities I struggle most to achieve in my own writing.

Cormac McCarthy (*All the Pretty Horses*) and Ian McEwan (*The Child in Time*) are two other writers whose spare but emotionally powerful styles have impressed me during this period.

During the course of this dissertation, I had my first real encounter with the crime genre. This was possibly to the detriment of my own writing, as it gave me an unrealistic desire to write a neat murder mystery with nicely tied-up clues and resolutions. After spending many months attempting to force Anna's story into this mould, I had to abandon the project; but not without being marked by a wistful admiration for the careful crafting, spartan lines and street-smart style of writers such as James Ellroy and Elmore Leonard.

Finally, I must acknowledge a debt to the genre of science fiction, so vast and wildly varying in quality. Science fiction was my first literary love, and ruled my imaginative life in adolescence. Apart from giving me taste for metaphor involving stars and astronauts, it also left me with an enduring desire to find other worlds beyond or within our own.

## II. COMPOSITION AND REVISION

In this section, I discuss the various revisions that this story has been through since I began writing in February 1996. It has undergone a number of radical transformations: there have been a number of false starts and dead ends, and large sections have been discarded or totally reworked. Nonetheless, at its heart it remains what it set out to be:

the story of a woman's recovery of a lost childhood self. This basic direction has remained constant.

### *Linking themes*

I started out with two narrative threads that I struggled to knit together. The initial impetus for the novel came from a short story I wrote in 1995 (*Burning Buildings*), about a woman in an abusive relationship. The seeds of Alan and Anna's relationship were sown in this story – although both characters were greatly changed and elaborated in the course of writing. In *Burning Buildings*, the scene in which she meets her lover for the first time at a reservoir became the starting point for the novel.

I was interested in representing a relationship with an active and a passive partner, the woman finding fulfillment by observing and recording the action of the man, but also being oppressed by such a relationship. I also wanted to explore the camera as a metaphor for unilateral longing and desire, and also sexual possession. My ultimate mission was to tell the story of a woman becoming freed from such a dependant relationship: coming out from behind the camera and claiming an active role for herself.

Simultaneously, I started working on a quite different narrative. This was sparked off by a vivid mental image of a little girl skating on roller-blades next to the sea. Physically, she resembled myself as a child of about ten; temperamentally she was a lot more imposing – tomboyish, severe, unafraid.

I felt compelled to tell the story of this rebellious pre-pubescent girl. Considering why this image was such a potent one for me, I realised it was because, as an adult, I regarded my

own ten-year-old self as some kind of ideal state: charmed, possessed of an energy and purpose that I felt had been dissipated and lost in adolescence. My vision of a child – who I named “Jo” – was really a vision of my own youth: a picture of a lost idyll of youthful “wildness”, energy, confidence, and a kind of integrity.

At this point I had no detailed storyline in mind; but I knew that my main character, Anna, should encounter this girl-child, and see in her a version of herself. Jo would be somehow instrumental in Anna reclaiming lost virtues, ultimately regaining her childhood “wildness.”

In this excerpt, Anna encounters Jo for the first time:

A child was sitting at the kitchen table, building a card house. Her hair was pulled into two stringy plaits. Anna noticed the care with which she aligned the cards – balancing edge on edge – and was reminded of Leah at school, precisely stacking library books. The child looked up at her with serious eyes, putting the card she was holding casually to one side to give Anna her full attention: a wholly adult gesture, like someone laying aside a cigarette or magazine. In that instant she seemed far older, the cards not so much a game as an idle passing of the time.

“Say hello,” said Alan from behind Anna’s back.

“Hello,” said the child.

“Hi. What’s your name?” Anna said, too loudly.

A long pause. The little girl’s face was tanned, perfectly oval, expressionless.

“Jo.”

“Hey, that’s almost like me, my other name’s Joanna.”

There was no response.

“So is hers, apparently,” said Alan, “but she doesn’t like it.”

Jo regarded her steadily for a moment longer. Her eyes were bright, animal-like. All at once the little girl stood, absently toppling the tower of cards, and moved smoothly along the edge of the table. As she emerged, Anna saw she was strapped into rollerblades, stiff-legged. She slid to a stop directly in front of Anna, where her eyes were level with Anna’s chest.

“Is that a camera?” asked Jo.

“Yes.” Anna took the camera out of the bag and removed the lens cap.

“Would you like me to take a picture? Of you in your skates?”

Jo looked intently at the camera. Her glance flickered surreptitiously over Anna’s shoulder at Alan.



"No." She skidded away towards the door, wheels noisy on the floorboards. "They're blades, not skates," she said on her way out. They could hear her stamping loudly down the stairs to the entrance lobby.

*(excerpt from draft, April 1997)*

Initially I worked on these two storylines – the lover and the child – in parallel, sensing an imperfect link between their themes. Both conjured up potent visual images for me, but I was unsure how to connect up the points of Anna, Alan and Jo into a workable triangle. At first, and for a long time, I thought the solution was to make Jo Alan's daughter. Thus, in her relationship with Alan, Anna encounters both adult desire and her own lost youth. But I was unable to make this father-child relationship plausible. Making Jo Alan's daughter only exacerbated my already burgeoning plot problems: there were too many attendant complications of sequence and chronology. I remained deadlocked here for a while, unable to find a convincing link between my two themes – neither of which I was prepared to abandon.

In October 1997 the first real breakthrough occurred, in the form of a seemingly unconnected piece of writing that I rapidly produced in a few productive weeks. This was a vivid recollection of high school days – a fictional episode occurring at a Cape Town school similar to the one I had attended in the eighties.

The high school section was by far the easiest to write, and proved important for me personally in that it forced me to examine a difficult and uncomfortable period of my own life. After fleshing out the adolescent Jo/Anna, I found it easier to depict her in a more honestly autobiographical way in her later years – and perhaps with more gentle self-aware humour.

At first, I recognised only that this school section was a piece of writing that tapped into my own deeply-felt regrets and memories. Only later would I see that the introduction of a school-age Anna was a turning-point in the writing of the book: it was the key, the sought-after link between Anna's fascination with childhood and her later obsession with the man Alan.

Several important ideas were established in the high school section. Firstly, it became apparent that Anna's own adolescence was significant to the story. The powerful character of Leah, who would haunt Anna for the remainder of the book, was introduced; and her adolescent obsession with the boy Robbie became a natural link to her more adult, but no less potent, affair with his older brother Alan. Lastly, Robbie's death introduced an element of threat and intrigue which would add tension to the subsequent story.

### *Elaboration and simplification*

Now I had another vital character, Leah, who needed to be worked into the already complex dynamic of Anna, Alan and Jo. I knew that Leah was a potent figure, the object of jealousy, mystery and awe on Anna's part. I knew she would return as a threatening figure, to sabotage Anna and Alan's relationship, and as a messenger from the past. I also felt that Anna would greet her return with a mixture of dread and sentimental longing. I just didn't know how to weave Leah into the other characters' stories. For a while I imagined her tied into a relationship with Alan as the long-lost mother of Alan's child, Jo; and also somehow mysteriously implicated in the death of his brother, the teenage Robbie. These connections might explain Leah's return into Anna's life.

However, ultimately I had to acknowledge that this scheme was beyond my powers as a plotter: I could not weave together all the necessary elements of motivation and conspiracy into a plausible chronology.

At last in September 1998 the solution occurred to me. I realised that there was no need for the complicating figure of Jo. The significant and relevant childhood was Anna's own; Jo was merely its reflection. Anna's memories did not need to be embodied in an actual child of flesh and blood. It was possible simply to subsume the character of Jo into Anna's own mature character and her recollections: Jo's story was contained within Anna's own life story. In addition, now that Leah had made her appearance as further reminder of the past, there were more than enough representations of female childhood in the story. The resentment that Anna feels towards Jo in early drafts, and which becomes an important dynamic in Anna's relationship to Alan, could be transferred onto the person of Leah. Towards the end of 1997, I finally removed Jo altogether, reducing the focus of the story.

This was the major revision that took place, and the one that corrected the course of the novel most dramatically. However, a number of other abortive side-plots, dead-ends and scenarios were also written in frustrated attempts to knit a convincing plot out of difficult elements. Many of these lovingly polished passages were pleasing in themselves – I remember with fondness Victor's pristine living-room, Anna's night on the mountain, the bonfire on the beach, a certain episode involving lions – but, as they did not further the plot or add to the substance of the story, they had to go. A good deal of the development of the narrative involved this kind of free-flow elaboration, followed by simplification and eradication of superfluous material.

For a while, I was concerned about the gender balance in the story: at one point there were no positive representations of men or negative ones of women. This pattern fluctuated and

even reversed in the course of writing, and I feel that ultimately the characters of Anna, Alan and Leah are complex or at least ambiguous enough for crude gender stereotyping not to be an issue. However, there was a point at which I wished to insert a more positive representative of the male sex.

One such character was Victor, who made his appearance in early 1998 as a friend of Alan's.

He was physically hard, emotionally distant, and had a shady military past:

If Alan seemed at times hard, Alan's friend Victor was a rock. His tall lean body was all sinew and scar, knotted together and pulled tight like guy-ropes. He had a short straight mouth like a slit, and his white-blond hair was cut razor-short like a comic-book marine's. Unlike Alan's, Victor's body was not charmingly changeable: his muscles seemed always maximally flexed, his hair never a millimetre shorter or longer.

...his eyes were as clear as a child's, the irises a high-altitude thin-air blue. Victor had a way of holding his eyes very wide open, as if the lids were too small to close properly; and those wide eyes and that permanently tensed body gave him the appalled look, thought Anna, of a falling man in the moment after the parachute fails to open.

*(excerpt from draft, December 1997)*

However, to Anna he was sympathetic, even attractive, standing in contrast to Alan's slapdash, raffish charm. Victor provided an outlet for Anna to express her dissatisfaction with her relationship with Alan – in one variation on the story, she has an affair with Victor; in another she takes refuge in his immaculately clean house. Victor was also a reflection of Anna's strong yearning for an order and purity frequently lacking in her own life. This slightly compulsive tendency was earlier expressed in her constrained art-school drawings, her geometric doodling, and her delight in the clean order of her office at the aquarium. But Victor did not offer enough of an alternative to Alan as an embodiment of desirable maleness. Much of his expressed character – taciturnity, physical power, an enigmatic quality, an air of undefined danger – were duplicated in Alan. If anything, Victor was even

more of a cardboard character than Alan, his internal life even less accessible to Anna. In addition, Alan was so very obviously the focus of Anna's sexual life, his presence left little room for a secondary sexual interest. At last I realised that there was no room in the story for yet another two-dimensional male foil for Anna's musings. As the Victor episode served only to complicate rather than advance the plot, I finally discarded it.

Zaid was another attempt at a sympathetic male character: a teenager, his role was largely to be a figure of youth – serving to remind Anna of the boys she knew at school, and to offer her an alternative view of them. He also functioned as a messenger, mysteriously helpful, an enigmatic force for good. In one discarded version, Zaid and the child Jo functioned as a luminous “couple”, emblematic of a youthful power that Anna had lost, or had never achieved – a new breed, bold, different and better:

Watching Jo with Zaid, she found herself again remembering the teenage boys she had known at school. But uncertainly, because of course when Anna was at school the boys had all been white; whereas Jo and Zaid seemed to belong to no race in particular, or to a new one – such similar yellow-brown eyes set in the deep tan of their faces. They moved with the same studied grace – Zaid lifting his skateboard onto the pavement with a single casual sideways heft of the body, knees flexing easily under his height; Jo leaning against the wall with a hand on one precociously cocked hip.

When Jo spoke to Anna, her face was closed; but with Zaid she was animated, touching his arm with easy playful gestures as she talked. Their smiles were like white chalk-marks on their faces in the evening light. At such times the children seemed unrelated to Victor, to herself, to any adult person; belonging only to each other.

*(excerpt from draft, July 1998)*

However, set against these rather intimidating youngsters, there was no way for Anna to claim her own youthful exuberance; all she could do was tiredly acknowledge the fact of ageing, and make way for the new generation. I wanted a different conclusion, one where Anna finds a sense of wonder for herself.

In another misguided exploration, Anna has an affair with Zaid, somehow regaining her lost youth through him. This turned out to be sentimental and implausible (not least because it displayed my own limited intimate knowledge of teenage boys.)

By the beginning of 1999, Zaid's presence had been reduced to two brief episodes at the beginning and at the end of the book, where he intervenes enigmatically to give Anna directions. Clearly, his character had become less than critical to the plot, and not substantial enough to represent anything so weighty as Goodness or Youth; so ultimately I decided to dispense with Zaid as well. The only vestige of him is a brief interaction Anna has with a teenage boy before her first visit to Alan. This is no more than a reminder, a brief glimpse into the past, on her way up the stairs to her first sexual encounter.

Thus by the beginning of 1999, I had pared the characters down to the bare essentials: the archetypal triangle of man, woman and rival. I feel this is fitting: for Anna, an essentially solitary woman who has difficulty relating to people, two significant others are more than enough.

### *Finding resolution*

Once I had finally established my characters and their basic interactions with each other, I experienced enormous difficulties writing an ending. I was led astray by a desire to find some all-encompassing resolution.

I thought that, to balance Robbie's death and bring the building tension of the book to a head, the story required the actual death of one or more of the characters. From the early stages of writing, I had felt that death would be the only way for Anna to wreak a

properly dramatic vengeance on Alan and Leah. Initially I had in mind Jo, the innocent, as some kind of sacrifice – possibly on the altar of Anna's own quest for personal fulfilment, with the child's death required to buy Anna's new life. In addition, Robbie's unexplained death introduced a note of distinct foreboding; I felt I had to justify this, and also the mystery surrounding his drowning, by writing a murder story or saga of revenge.

Drowning seemed the obvious manner of death; ideally, a drowning to occur at the site of Robbie's death, Steenbaai, thus bringing the story full circle. In an early version, this involved Leah and Jo both falling into the sea off the dangerous rocky point, with Anna failing to rescue Leah. Later, in a version written in January 1999, after the eradication of Jo from the plot, Anna pushes Alan over the edge of the point, in a mirror of the death of his younger brother Robbie years before.

I knew these endings were pat and implausible; but only in the final stages of the process did I accept that a death would be too jarring and unlikely. Eventually, with some forceful pointers from my supervisor, I came to understand that instead of having to tie in all the loose ends in some contrived resolution, all that was really needed was a symbolic death – of the relationship, of Anna's need for Alan, of her old fixations. This immediately relieved me of the task of weaving a convoluted plot to bring Leah, Anna and Allan together at the point of (someone's or everyone's) death.

In her ultimate creative act, Anna does indeed "kill" Alan – or at least her image of him, which, as she herself understands, had little to do with the real Alan, under the skin. Thereafter, she recovers herself and is free to leave, to enter the "motion of the world."

## *A sample passage*

The following passage, presented in three different successive versions, demonstrates my process of revision. This interaction, where Anna visits Alan for the first time at his home, has been in the manuscript almost from its inception, and has survived through many different drafts. The transformation of this one passage illustrates some of the stylistic and thematic developments that the book as a whole underwent.

*March 1997:*

He was pacing, black overalls rolled down to show his hips, a line of sweat-damp hair running from navel to crotch. His face, chest and forearms were spattered with royal blue paint, and he held a paintbrush back-handed like a dagger. He turned to look at her, his shades impenetrably chromed. A golden stud in his nose caught the sun like a hot star. In the back of her throat she tasted a hot and secret sweetness.

On the wall of the garden shed he had painted a gigantic blue lion, pacing to the right on massive paws, head turned three-quarters to glare out of the wall. The paint was slashed thickly to suggest powerful shoulders, ridged spine, grooved flanks. The intense heat shimmer on the wall made the lion seem to twitch its skin.

They greeted, and Anna touched his side, the skin hot and tight over his bones, sticky with sweat. Her fingers came away blue, and she laughed; they burnt as if they had touched wet fire. She saw herself reflected in his chromed shades, looking dwarfish and stout in their insect-eye curves.

"Nice lion."

The mouth was level with her eyes, slightly open to expose the teeth. Anna looked from Alan's face to the lion's and back – the open mouth, the bright teeth, the heavy ravening look – and smiled.

Alan took her hand absently, as he often did, a casual unthinking habit, something to grip while he cast around for a cigarette. She wanted to stand there like that for an age, feeling the hot sun melting down into her skull. But she felt through his hand a restlessness sweep through him, and knew that he could not stand to be so still, any more than a shark could stop swimming.

Turning, he knocked the paint can off the workbench. Anna felt his small flush of release at the noise, the simple action that broke the awkwardness.



"Oh shit," he said in a pleased voice. "Now look what I've done." Anna started to laugh, and could see he was glad to amuse her. Bright blue paint spread on the concrete like cartoon blood.

"I thought you could take some pictures of it?" he asked.

"What?"

It seemed she could not stop laughing.

"The lion."

Hilarious. And of course she took the picture.

In this early version, I am still unsure as to the location of the interaction: I vaguely picture it happening in the back garden of a house. Already at this stage I have some idea of drawing (none too subtle) parallels between Alan and animals, with the lion is my chosen symbol. However, some shark imagery has crept in; later, the shark becomes the primary metaphorical animal, particularly strongly associated with Alan.

Alan himself is quite young in this version (he wears a trendy nose-stud), and relatively accessible, more delightfully decorative than intimidating. The relationship between him and Anna is somewhat different to what it later becomes. At this point, she has more power in the relationship, and the ability to intimidate Alan: when he knocks over the paint, he is embarrassed by his clumsiness. He also seems discomfited by the evident sexual tension and physical contact. Anna, on the other hand, does not seem to be uneasy: she touches him easily and immediately. His reactions are an important part of the interaction, and are noticed by Anna: she is very aware of his restlessness and awkwardness.

He also needs her: he asks her to take the photograph of his painting. At this point, it is Alan who is the creative one, the painter. Anna is the observer, the recorder; she does not yet have a true creative outlet of her own.

Stylistically, this passage now seems flawed to me: the descriptions a little too lavish, the sexual tension overplayed. In later drafts, I tried to be both more spare and subtler.

December 1997:

He wore brown overalls rolled down to his hipbones. His sweaty chest and forearms were spattered with white paint, and he carried a flat paintbrush daggerwise in his hand. His body was, unnervingly, even broader and denser than she remembered it from the reservoir; different to the bodies of boys her own age. As he came towards her she almost stood aside, as one would move from the path of an oncoming car. But she held her ground, watching herself approach in the insectoid curves of his shades.

Behind him was a small caretaker's room, perched on top of the building like the bridge of a ship; he was giving it another coat of white paint.

"So bright," she laughed, squinting at him. "I should have brought my shades."

He scratched his cheek, leaving a white streak on the side of his nose.

"Come," he said abruptly. "Let's go inside."

He carried the paintbrush into the little room, and she followed him to the door and peered inside. He switched on a naked lightbulb and started impatiently moving paintcans and jars of turps around.

"There's nothing in here," he said. "Just paint and shit."

He switched off the lightbulb, leaving them momentarily in oil-smelling darkness, and then he was ushering her out into the brightness and closing the door behind them. He seemed embarrassed.

"Wait," she said. "I want a picture."

"Jesus, do you carry that thing everywhere?"

"You know I do."

She knew he could not resist the camera's caress, and raised it to her face like a gladiator's mask. Alan was immediately reduced, composing himself obediently in the small frame of her viewfinder. He was a cautious man-shaped piece of flotsam on an impossibly bright beach.

She worked quickly, taking four or five rapid shots. A fleeting memory from years before: Leah playing the flute – the same serious absorption, fingers moving with the same surety. Anna paused, uneasy to discover this unwelcome visitor inside herself.

Alan had taken off his shades and stood expectantly, eyes closed, arms spread to catch the sun. The light covered him in a skin of gold. Barely thinking, Anna stepped towards him and laid one hand lightly on his chest. *The flesh of some densely muscled animal: a horse, a shark.* She kissed him once on the lips, as delicately as a shadow touching his face. He smiled without opening his eyes; a lucky sleeper finding his way into a peaceful dream.

At this point, Alan has settled into his final identity. He has taken his rightful place on the white rooftop, with his handyman's paraphernalia around him. Now there is clearly a substantial age difference between him and Anna, which is stressed in this passage. This has the effect of making Alan seem more alien, different to people of her own age, unlike Anna herself. Physically, he has become more imposing, less pretty. Anna, although still desiring him, is a little wary of his more substantial body.

In terms of the imagery used to describe Alan, the showy lion has been replaced by the colder, slightly threatening shark. Alan has himself become more sharklike, less leonine: he has lost the body hair and the flashy jewellery, and his manner towards Anna is colder and more intimidating.

He has also become irritable and tetchy – although still won over in the end by the seduction of the camera. However, he does not beg for the photograph, as previously. This indicates a change in the power balance between Anna and Alan: Anna now needs to take the picture, to be the recording eye, more than Alan needs to be photographed.

However, Alan has lost his power to create: the paint and oil and paintbrushes are now more markers of action and masculinity (further distinguishing him from Anna) rather than creativity. His tasks have become more practical, less frivolous.

Leah makes a brief appearance in Anna's thoughts – but she is not a welcome visitor. At this stage Leah has been introduced into the relationship between Anna and Alan, but the nature of Anna's feelings towards Leah is unclear; she is torn between hostility and nostalgia.

As Alan becomes less approachable, the first explicitly sexual moment – the photograph, leading now into a kiss – becomes more potent. This scene is tenser and

more charged than the earlier version, in which a friendlier, easier physicality is evident.

The dynamics between Alan and Anna also appear to be more complicated and difficult.

*February 1999:*

There was a small shed at one corner of the roof, rising above the rest of the building like the cabin of a ship; he was painting its white door even whiter.

"So bright," she complained, squinting at him. "I need shades too."

He looked around at the sound of her voice, and stood frowning, holding the flat paintbrush daggerwise in his hand. His brown overalls were rolled down to his hipbones, his chest bare.

"Oh shit, is it that time?"

"Afraid so."

"Let me just put this stuff away."

Anna kept her distance as he rinsed his brush in turpentine, methodically packed the cans and brushes away inside the room, closed the freshly-painted door and locked it with a padlock. Then he turned and came towards her, wiping his hands on the backside of his overalls. His dark glasses were impenetrably chromed, and he had not smiled at her yet.

Unclothed, his torso was unnervingly broad – even broader than she remembered it from the reservoir, and different to the bodies of boys her own age. She almost stood aside, as one would move from the path of an oncoming car. But she held her ground, watching herself approach squatly in the lenses of his shades.

"Wait," she said, lifting the camera between them. "I want a picture."

"Jesus, do you carry that thing everywhere?"

"You know I do."

She raised the Nikon to her face like a gladiator's mask. In the small frame of her viewfinder, Alan was immediately reduced. He composed himself obediently, taking off his shades and wiping the sweat from his upper lip, leaving a streak of white paint. Eyes closed, he spread his arms to catch the sun.

Anna lowered the camera. Barely thinking, she stepped towards him and laid one hand lightly on his chest. *The flesh of some densely muscled animal: a horse, a shark.* She kissed him formally on the lips, her touch as delicate as a shadow falling across his face.

In this excerpt we see a paring down and a simplification, both in the language used and the actions described. Stylistically, the tone is more controlled, with fewer purple

phrases (for example, the “cautious man-shaped piece of flotsam on an impossibly bright beach” of the previous example has been discarded.)

The physical environment has also become more spare: the description of the interior space of the workroom, with its paintcans and distinctive aromas, has now been moved to an earlier episode in Alan’s art school workshop.

Among other details, the reference to Leah has disappeared. She does not yet intrude on Anna’s relationship with Alan, reappearing only later.

The whole scene is shorter, moving more precipitously towards the central rapturous moment: the kiss. This kiss has become less warm; we experience it, through Anna, as an intensely felt symbolic moment, a formal gesture that initiates the relationship. Alan’s immediate reaction to the kiss, positive in previous drafts, is now left unstated. He has become more enigmatic, his responses more difficult to read. The human emotions evident in him in the first draft – embarrassment, need, pleasure in Anna’s company – have fallen away, replaced first by tetchy impatience and then by a macho inscrutability. We are not sure of his reactions to Anna, being totally immersed in her reactions to him.

These changes reflect Anna’s increased sense of distance from Alan; he has become mysterious, other, a canvas for Anna’s own perceptions. They also indicate the extent of her self-involvement. Her point of view has become narrowly focused: she is intensely self-aware, but not particularly sensitive to other people’s emotional responses.

## CONCLUSION

In this preface I have related how my own experiences of growing up in Cape Town have shaped this novel. I have also discussed aspects of the composition and revision of the text. I hope that this document proves to be a useful adjunct to the novel itself.

*Sea Creatures of the Southern Deep* is about the recovery of childhood and childlike qualities: fearlessness, excitement, and integration with the natural world. As such, it is a personal statement of hope, and a celebration of all wild things.

## *Sea Creatures of the Southern Deep*

# Shark egg

It is a strange day to come walking by the sea: cold, with pewter glints on the waves, and above them a white empty sky. Her mother walks slowly, keeping her face tilted towards the horizon. They are the only people on the beach.

Joanna runs impatiently ahead, splashing in the shallow water, talking to the sea. The foam whispering up the sand is so cold it makes the bones of her feet ache. It tells tiredly of deepsea things: storms, shipwreck, monsters, islands.

But Joanna – five years old and fearless, tireless – is only half-listening. She is busy finding gifts for her mother: a dry sea-sponge as hard as a stone; the crystal flesh of a shattered jellyfish. And here, a curious black pod, with a spine the length of her little finger at each corner. When she picks it up it leaves a neat impression in the damp sand.

*Look, look here, what's this?*

Her mother turns it over carefully in her pale fingers. *It's a shark egg*, she says, her voice strangely regretful, handing it back to the child. *Some people call them mermaid's purses.*

Joanna is incredulous, delighted. She takes the odd precious thing in both hands; it is made of something vegetable and tough, not like an egg at all.

*Is it? Is it really from a shark?*

A grey mist rolls in from the sea, erasing the scene.

At home, sceptical, she cuts the object open with her father's nail-scissors. Inside, the embryo is still alive, a perfect little shark no bigger than a small tadpole. It gapes and thrashes its tail, at last expires. Her mother wraps the whole egg in toilet paper and throws it in the rubbish. Joanna is shaken, and for days feels deeply guilty.

But also powerful: she has killed a shark.

*Sharks never stop swimming*, her tired mother tells her; *if they do, they sink and die. It's sink or swim for sharks.*

So Joanna keeps moving – in the bath, eating her supper, even when she lies down to sleep – so that she will not sink and die. Playing alone in the big garden, she swims like a shark across the lawn, scaring up the birds that have come to feed. With crayons of purple and mauve she makes pictures of sharks: they have toothy jaws and enormous fins. Her mother smiles cautiously at the bright ferocious drawings.

At night sometimes, sharks swim in the dark outside Joanna's bedroom window, bumping their pale snouts against the pane. They are looking for the shark killer; they are curious. In the moonlight Joanna lies wide awake and unafraid. She is entranced by the silent creatures, so fierce and sleek. Their wildness excites her – like secrets, like the sea, like the big world waiting.

She thinks: *I am like that. They are like me.*

She thinks: *I will never stop moving.*



# Wild animals

Leah sat directly in front of Joanna in class. She was a library monitor, one of a misfit group allowed to skip Gym and Guidance to help the school librarian shelve books. Joanna was also often in the library, hiding from class and drawing with ballpoint pen in the margins of novels; and they were friends of a kind.

A neat dark girl, Leah seldom spoke or smiled. In Maths, she would let Joanna copy work over her shoulder, moving her small hand aside for Joanna to see. Leah's notes were written in an angular, closely-spaced hand. It was this handwriting that first intrigued: not the even rounded script one would expect from such a girl, but an angry inturned scrawl – much like Joanna's own.

She admired Leah's composure. For Joanna, the world was filled with moving light, burning and rushing ahead without her while she sat tragically at her desk, chewing and fretting at her pens, her clothes, her fingernails. The chalkboard was intolerable, the uniform chafed at her neck and thighs. She rattled the pens on her desk with her jiggling knees, laddered her stockings and smeared blue ink on her fingers. On the pages of textbooks she drew fish with sharp teeth eating other smaller fish; and cartoon heads with axes in them; "J" she wrote, for her name; and hearts, and daggers, and daggers through hearts. She was thirteen years old.

To calm herself, she concentrated her gaze on the geometric precision of Leah's plait, or two plaits with a straight white parting, and wondered at how she contained herself in such a world.

In the change room before gym, Joanna surreptitiously examined Leah's neat body, her immaculate underwear. She wore white cotton panties that came up high over a childishly flat stomach, a small unnecessary bra. *So perfect*, thought Joanna: *her pale-brown skin, her delicate bones*. Alone at home, Joanna would undress in front of the mirror to examine her own troublesome shape: the swelling breasts, the thickening waist and hips. Her mother's cats pawed back and forth behind her in the glass, smug in the animal perfection of their bodies.

From her seat at the back of the class next to the window, Joanna watched the older boys playing cricket outside in the windy sunlight. The girls all knew their names by heart; in School Assembly every day those same names sighed through the hall in a sweet rustling undercurrent to the Lord's Prayer: *André van Eck, Brent Garson, Douglas Meyer, Robbie du Plessis*...names like dirty kisses on the tongue. Rough boys, surfers, dagga-smokers; they walked like a little army through the school, ties loose around their necks, spinning a stained tennis-ball into the air and watching the girls with derisory hungry mouths.

They looked straight through Joanna, because she of course was a mouse, invisible; but she would pass just close enough in the corridors to breathe in their alien smell of sweat and grass and cigarettes. Their bodies were smooth and slightly gritty, like certain kinds of stone; and their cheeks occasionally bloodied with little razor cuts. Not the smallest detail, not stray hair or ripped fingernail or nicotine stain escaped Joanna's meticulous gaze.

On her desk, Joanna engraved his name with the point of her compass: *ROBBIE*. With religious concentration she carved the deep letters – she wanted to make them solid, something she could touch. All the girls practised similar magic: over and over they wrote boys' names on pencil cases, in diaries, on their hands, on their thighs under their

dresses; the classroom air was dense with spells. Unaware, the chosen boys were tugged and tranced with a thousand small ritual acts, with the devotional writing and recital of names. Only Leah did not indulge: her skin was unmarked, and her pink fabric pencil-case unnaturally clean, as if laundered.

At home in bed, Joanna summoned again with secret pleasure the shape of Robbie's body, drawn against the bright summer grass of the playing field. She thought of those toys for young children, where one fits coloured shapes – circles, triangles, stars – into holes in a plastic frame. When she saw him at school, there was an almost audible click in her head – the yellow star locking with a pleasing rightness into the star-shaped space – as some internal gap was satisfied.

He had long legs and white hair and a medical bracelet that gleamed like jewellery under the cuff of his white school shirt. His face was not clear to her: it was a spot of light that she could barely look at, obscured by the bleached fringe over his eyes. Sometimes she imagined putting her hand at that place at the nape of his neck where the hair was shaved, touching the short bristles with her palm; but mostly she wanted simply to watch him. *Robbie du Plessis*, she whispered, dawdling between classes, hoping for a glimpse of him down the long sunstruck corridors.

The curved bellies of the Bs were tricky, but finally Joanna was finished: the letters even and square. Very neatly, she dotted a line of spaced points under the name. Surely, even up in the second-storey Std. 9 classroom, he must feel the pricking on his skin. She put her index finger over the scored wood; it pulsed as if it had its own heartbeat.

Looking up, she was startled to meet a complicit gaze. Leah's eyes, rarely seen directly, had clear, yellow-brown irises, catlike. Joanna felt a doubtful embarrassed pleasure: the name was indelible now. It had been witnessed.

■ ■ ■

Leah had placed something in the middle of her desk: a round object the size of two fists, covered in strawberry-coloured silk. It looked like a pink heart clasped in Leah's thin brown hands. Intrigued, Joanna watched over Leah's shoulder as she pressed the little bronze catch and the thing hinged apart: in each half a circular mirror was set into pearly silk. The circles of reflection trembled, holding briefly views of the ceiling, of Leah's tan cheek, and of one brown eye. Joanna smiled back tentatively.

"Do you like it?" Leah asked without turning around.

Joanna nodded shyly. Leah turned in her desk then and held the case out, carefully, as if the mirrors were pools of mercury that might spill.

"You can see both sides of your face at once," she said reverently. "And look, it's got manicure things in it."

With the nails of her thumb and forefinger, Leah found in hidden slots behind the mirrors a file and cuticle-pusher, pulling them halfway out like miniature swords from their scabbards. Joanna, whose nails were bitten and square, was more interested in the trembling fragments of face, dress, window, sunlight.

"Do you like it?" Leah asked again.

Joanna took the opened manicure set in both hands and moved the twinned reflections, changing the angle between them.

"Here, look," – Leah was almost standing up in her desk in her eagerness. "Put your face next to mine."

Cautiously, Joanna glanced at the teacher; but teachers seldom watched the quiet ones at the back. She leaned forward and put her cheek next to Leah's. Together they peered into the vanity case, a face in each mirror.

"You and me," breathed Leah, and slowly shut the reflections on each other. They locked together with a subdued snap of the catch.

Joanna sat back in her seat, smiling uneasily. She imagined her reflection trapped inside the strawberry silk case with Leah's, knocking up against the mirrored walls.

Leah spent much time in class buffing and filing her fingernails to pearly ovals: they were pink up until the end of the quick, then extended beyond her fingertips in perfect white half-moons.

"French manicure," Leah instructed, spreading her fingers on Joanna's desk. "Makes your fingers look longer."

Joanna nodded seriously, shoving her own clenched fists between her thighs and the wooden seat.

Leah would sometimes turn the mirrorcase around, shining little circles of light across the classroom onto other pupil's open books, their hands and legs. The little wandering moons of light stroked calves and thighs, or settled briefly on cheeks: kisses too light to be felt, messages not received.

Sometimes, Joanna would look over Leah's shoulder and see a single serious eye in the mirror, and know she was observed.

■ ■ ■

Up on the high field a group of children stood, in the indecisive struck manner of people at the scene of an accident or crime. From the bottom of the field, a lone teacher jogged towards them, panting in his shirtsleeves and pale blue acrylic pants. Joanna approached the crowd, and pushing to the front saw the body arching on the grass at the centre of the ring.

"Robbie du Plessis," whispered someone next to her, in a slow entranced voice.

"He's epileptic."

"They should put a pencil between his teeth," said someone else, drowsily, but nobody moved towards the convulsing figure.

Vehemently Robbie threw his arms and legs out from his long body and clutched them in again, preventing approach. The silver bracelet at his wrist caught the sunlight as he swung his arm. His eyes were white in his head.

The teacher reached the group and knelt beside Robbie, who at last calmed and lay still, his face ashen. He looked dead.

"Go away," said the teacher. "Give us some space here. Everybody go away."

*He's dead.*

For the rest of the day, Joanna sat queasily at her desk, hunched over the guilt in her stomach. She lay forward on the desk to hide his name in the wood. *He's dead. A bad spell.*

But the next week Robbie was back at school, taller and harder: his shoulders bulky under his blazer like a man's. There was an angry length to his stride as he patrolled the school, his friends flanking him like lieutenants.

Joanna saw death behind him as he walked: a grey shadow creeping up to flick some fatal switch at the back of his head. She wanted to touch him now, hold his skull in her hands, place herself between him and danger. Because she was a shadow too, and could see things invisible to others: ghosts lounging in the corridors, darkness inside the sunlight.

She could not forget the violence of his seizure, the focused power of those flung spasming limbs. She dreamt hard sunlit dreams about him, full of movement: Robbie's arched back, his impossible rigidity, his hands clenching and clawing and never gaining purchase on the air. His blind eyes and bared teeth slithered and thrashed into her head, waking her up with a beating heart in the middle of the night, with a camera-flash memory of some bright movement, some unplaceable disappointment.

# The blue room

There was a shed at the far corner of the school grounds, used to store wheelbarrows, hosepipes, lengths of board and wire. A narrow alley, overgrown with grass and weeds, ran between it and the perimeter fence. At one end of this dim corridor grew an ancient pine tree. Next to it was a gnarled hibiscus bush, which would occasionally produce red flowers of surprising Hawaiian exuberance.

Joanna would come here at lunchtime, or sometimes illicitly during certain classes such as Bible Education, when she wasn't in the library. She enjoyed the melancholy of the decrepit plants – the relics of an old colonial garden. She would sit with a book between the roots of the pine, in the mulch of fallen needles, peering through the gaps in the fence with fierce longing. If she crouched down low enough, she could look straight over the roofs of the houses and see Table Mountain, and imagine nothing between her and it: no buildings, no roads, no school at all.

So she sat one hot summer lunchtime. The mountain was pale, a spectral Himalaya. If she leaned forward and peered around the pine roots into the sunlight she could see, on the other side of the top playing field, the chestnut trees where some of the older pupils smoked cigarettes. Joanna kept an eye on the lightly shaking chestnut leaves, and was watching when Robbie dropped out of them to the ground. He stood for a moment, squinting through his white fringe; then he put his hands in his pockets and strolled across the field, straight towards her.

She could only sit completely still, gripping her paperback. A slight movement behind her, at the other end of the alleyway, made her turn: Leah's head was poking around the



corner of the shed. Her eyes were slitted against the sun and her small head extended like a lizard's on its slender neck. She did not seem to see Joanna crouched in the shade. *They're going to come here*, Joanna thought in horror, smelling secrets. *They're going to see me.*

But instead Robbie skirted around the front of the shed, and reappeared framed in the golden mouth of the alley where Leah stood. Soundlessly, Joanna shifted in her place to watch. Leah's head disappeared; then she reappeared in full, facing towards Joanna: her ironed school uniform reaching to just above her knees, white socks pulled up over her ankles, childish sandal shoes. Her hands were poised at her sides, her back straight like a little ballet dancer.

Robbie had put his back against the wall – Joanna could see only his shoulder, his right arm, a golden-furred right knee. A stray white hair from his head danced gently up and down in the sunlight: he was speaking, but too softly for Joanna to hear.

Leah seemed sceptical. She shrugged and turned her head and said a few words over her shoulder to the sky. Robbie moved his right leg forward, sliding his foot next to Leah's instep. She stopped talking and looked at him quizzically, still with her chin tilted away. He reached out his right hand and laid it on Leah's narrow hip; then slowly crept it up her waist, her torso, as her arm moved slightly outwards from her body. Then he moved his hand around to her front and stroked her small breast, rubbing his thumb roughly over it. Leah watched him with a calm appraising stare. Then she nodded once, and stood back. Robbie's shoulder disappeared from view, and the peeled blue shed door swung open like a section of sky. Leah went in, then Robbie, his long-fingered hand briefly gripping the door. Just before he stepped inside, he turned his face slightly into the sun, so that Joanna glimpsed for a second his bright cheek and temple. She turned her own face away as if scorched. The door closed behind them.

Joanna was down on her knees in the mulch, almost touching the dank greenish earth with her nose. They had not seen her. She was invisible: she could stand up now, open the door and walk straight into the shed, and still they would not see her. *Less than a mouse, less than a bird: I am a ghost, a pair of eyes only.*

She got to her feet and walked stiffly and quickly from the alley, out onto the playing field, away from the dark shape of the shed, the twisted pine, the bloody fallen hibiscus blooms. A few other schoolchildren sitting or standing in groups on the field turned to look at her curiously, then glanced away. She stood for a while breathing heavily in the open sunlight. The shed was a shadow in the corner of her eye, a clot of dark blood on the edge of the sunlit world. Could nobody else hear those sounds that issued from it, the moans and cries? Could they not see the shadows roaming the bright field, the grey longing wraiths?



Leah was late for class after lunch that day. As she sat down Joanna thought she caught the sour odour of the shed: moss and rot. On one of Leah's pointy knees was the smallest smudge of earth – as telling as a wound on that unblemished skin. Joanna looked up to find Leah watching her, revealing the tips of her small teeth in a tiny amused smile. Without taking her eyes off Joanna's face, Leah delicately unzipped her pencil-case, withdrew a white handkerchief and wiped the soil from her knee. Then she raised a slim index finger, placed its tip briefly on her lips, and lowered her head to her books.

The next day, Joanna watched closely as Leah unzipped her pencil-case, turning the edge down – perhaps deliberately – to show what was written on the inside:

*RduP*, it said, in neat printed letters. Underlined.

Leah thrust her hand into the bag. Joanna could not look away from those deft fingers rooting among the sharpened pencil points, the compasses, the silver scissor blades.

■ ■ ■

Joanna did not go up to the shed any more. She sat at lunch break on the field in a circle with Jacky and Charmaine, Nicky M, Nikki K. In the sun the girls compared the shapes of their outstretched legs, rolling down their white socks to show off their pretty tanned ankles. But with spy's eyes Joanna watched the shed at the top of the field: noting who went in and who came out; when Leah entered and when she emerged. And she thought:

*Robbie du Plessis.*

And a week later, she thought:

*Trevor Willis.*

And then after that, in quick succession:

*André van Eck, Craig Lategan, Deon James.*

And then André and Trevor. Together. And then Robbie and Trevor. Robbie, André, Mark. And more, making their way in surreptitious single file to the shed at lunch break, like ants to syrup.

Leah's pencil case remained unmarked on the outside, but these days seemed to bulge with more than just pens. Joanna sat in class with her eyes fixed on it, affronted and fascinated

by its pinkness. In front of her, Leah squared her narrow shoulders and ignored Joanna's gaze.

One day, Leah left class to go to the bathroom, leaving her pencilcase unguarded on her desk. Joanna stared at it for a moment. Then quickly, casually, she reached a trespassing arm across the expanse of the desk and grabbed it to her. She sat clutching it in her lap for a moment, waiting to be challenged; but nobody was watching.

She unzipped the case and examined the interior. On the salmon lining were columns of initials, printed very neatly in fine koki pen. Some she immediately recognised, some she couldn't. There were over twenty boys in the list.

Suddenly Leah was there, grabbing the case out of her hands. Pencils and pens scattered to the floor, and people sitting in the desks around them turned to look. The two girls leant together to pick the things up, then sat again tensely in their seats until the others turned their attention away.

It was Joanna who leant forward, whispering urgently into the back of Leah's head, to a point at the base of that neat glossy plait:

"What do you do there, in the shed?"

The plait was mute. Leah carefully zipped closed her pink bag of secrets.

"With all those boys?" persisted Joanna.

No response. Joanna remained leaning forward tensely, examining individual hairs. Then Leah turned suddenly in her desk. She put her mouth very near Joanna's ear, and held it there for a few meaning seconds. She whispered:

"I..." a pause; Leah moved her mouth down to Joanna's cheek, millimetres from her skin. She smelt of warm spearmint chewing gum. Joanna kept her eyes rigidly forward, embarrassed. The boy in the desk next to hers watched them sidelong. Then Leah made a sound, low and explicit:

"Mmm..."

A sample, a kiss, an invitation. Leah gave a little laugh – hot breath on Joanna's cheek – turned abruptly and sat forward in her seat again. Her shiny brown plait was segmented like an insect's body. Joanna fixed her eyes on the board, pricking the tips of her fingers with the point of her compass and blushing.

■ ■ ■

The class went to town, to visit the Natural History Museum. It was an intolerably hot day – the sides of Lion's Head had been burning for two days, and the air hanging above the city was a crematorium brown. Joanna submerged herself with relief in the coolness of the old museum building, like a crocodile into mud.

She wandered absorbed from exhibit to exhibit: the bent thin bodies in the San hall, eyes squeezed tight shut against the plaster that had been used to make their casts; violet crystals bristling on the inside of a split rock; a baby quagga, kept in a dark case with a timed light switch to preserve its precious ghostly stripes. In the dinosaur hall, she paused at each brightly-lit case to peer in at the plaster creatures: sluggish herbivores wading through a faded khaki swamp; one Karoo reptile ripping a bloody chunk from the back of another.

"That's disgusting," said Charmaine, walking next to her.

Irritated, Joanna lingered in the snake room, letting the others pass her by until their chatter receded. Moving in the opposite direction, she found herself on a carpeted ramp, which led up and through a doorway into a large dim amphitheatre. To one side of the entrance was an illuminated sign, black lettering against glowing blue: *Hall 4: Sea Creatures of the Southern Deep*. Hesitating, she could hear distantly the teacher's high-pitched admonition, the yelp of a rubber-soled shoe kicked against the floor. She moved forward into the high-ceilinged space.

Inside, three whale skeletons of varying enormity were suspended by cables from the ceiling. She stood for a long time with a crooked neck, imagining the dense stately bodies that had filled out the bones. Like a little child she wanted to taste them, lick at their bleached curves. Stepping back, she discovered a stairwell recessed into the wall.

She climbed upwards, and came out underwater. The room was flooded with a deep aquatic light, and creatures floated above her head: plaster models, hanging from almost invisible threads. She passed cautiously beneath the jagged mouth of a shark. Beyond were two flat-bodied animals, the smaller one resting under the wing of the larger. She had seen stingrays before, but these were different, huge; if one fell it would crush her. Their bodies were broad and smooth, with delicate rigid mouthparts and gills like knife-cuts on their pale undersides. Joanna felt a vertiginous swoon as their forms seemed to sweep over her head, the hair tugged back from her forehead by the pull of their passing. *Creatures from dreams*. Dizzily, she looked about for something solid in the room to hold onto.

There was a small breathing figure beside her in the blue light. Leah had come into the room silently, and also stood staring up at the suspended fish, mouth slightly open.

"They're beautiful," whispered Leah. "Do you know what they're called?"

"No." Joanna felt faint.

"Manta rays."

Leah was transformed by the light into a submarine being: her skin stained a soft blue, with hollows of deeper azure where her collar-bones met and under her eyes. Her voice was dulled but carrying, like sound underwater. She seemed very close, then shifting away, her image refracting through unseen planes of water. When she looked straight at Joanna, the whites of her eyes were glowing blue. Joanna took a step backwards.

"It's better by ourselves," Leah said. "Do you want to go for a cigarette? We could sneak out to town."

Joanna hesitated.

"I don't smoke."

Leah smiled, a scornful showing of blue teeth. Then she reached up and with a little jump touched the wingtip of one of the rays, making it swing. Joanna flinched.

"I know," said Leah, slyly. "We could go to Trevor's house. He's bunking today."

The ray swayed above them gently.

"I don't know..."

"Come with." Leah's whisper was suddenly urgent. "Please?"

She reached out and took Joanna's hand, startling her. Joanna did not respond: Leah's fingers felt cool and foreign and wiry. After an awkward moment, Leah released her grip.

"Robbie will be there," said Leah. "I know you like him. It'd be fun."

Something bright and tempting had swum between them in the blue dark, some prettily striped electric fish that hung before Joanna's face, in touching distance.

"We'll get in trouble," she said at last; and watched the fish dart away between her outstretched fingers, back into the dark. "Better not."

Leah's face closed down, the wide eyes abruptly lidding. She stepped away from Joanna and out from under the hanging rays.

"Okay," she said, sounding bored. "Suit yourself, I guess."

Leah did not look back as she walked away and descended the stairs, leaving Joanna alone in the deep blue chamber, circled by sharks. Joanna balled her fists in the pockets of her blazer. She felt light-headed and ill with cowardice. The ragged-tooth shark held a gleam in its blind glass eye, and the wings of the rays above her head were ghostly in the darkening room. The blue light pressed at her eyeballs and eardrums like deep water.

For the rest of the week, Joanna carried the weight of those great fish suspended over her, desolate with the knowledge of a lost opportunity – for what exactly, what unnamed excitements or communion or tremulous secrets, she could not say. The manta rays swum into her dreams that night and many nights after, passing silently over and under her as she drifted in a black ocean.

■ ■ ■

Sitting on the field with the other girls, she felt a new scorn for Jacky, Charmaine, for Nicky and Nikki. They talked of boys, teachers, parties, crushes.



And she thought:

*She fucks them. Fuck. Fucking. She fucks them in the shed. She fucks.*

Turning the dirty words in her head, dark things hidden in the sunlight.

She did not have to look up to know that Leah was walking up the field; she felt Leah's movement if she were her dark twin, as if part of her walked alongside Leah, drawn relentlessly into the dim interior of the shed.

"There goes Leah," said Jacky.

Joanna could hear the uncertainty in her voice. *Did she know?*

"Shame, she doesn't have friends," said Charmaine, Jacky's best friend.

*No, they definitely don't know.*

"She should come sit with us at break," said Jacky.

The other girls hushed as Jacky considered, eyes slitted against the sun.

"You're friends with her, aren't you, Joanna?" she continued. "You should ask her."

Joanna opened her mouth, confused by this rearrangement of alliances, wondering how she was being tested.

"I don't know her so well," she said, cagily. "She just sits in front of me."

But Jacky, with the moody perversity of power, persisted:

"Let's invite her to come on the weekend. We should help her to make friends."

So it was decided.

# Kiss

Eight girls had been favoured with invitations. Jacky's parents' holiday house was on the coast beyond Steenbaai, an hour and a half's drive from Cape Town. On the Friday night they all went to a shabby local disco, and got lifted back at eleven in Jacky's father's combi. They slept on the living-room floor: Jacky and Charmaine in the centre, whispering to each other intimately; more peripheral persons ranged towards the edges. Joanna was positioned between Nikki and Leah, who was next to the door. Alert to subtleties of hierarchy, she turned her back on Leah.

The girls talked about the disco; about slowdancing and French kissing.

"Did you get off with him?"

"With your tongue?"

"I like it when they kiss, like, you know, all soft and slow."

"How many boys have you kissed? Jacky?"

Joanna was quiet, pretending to sleep. She felt around her in the room the gaps of silence, the spaces where various unfavoured people lay, listening intently. Kathleen, fat but considered sweet. Sally, whose excessively frizzy hair was somehow inappropriate; of course Leah. And Joanna, who was here on mystifying social probation.

"You know what, Trevor and them are in Hermanus this weekend."

"Trevor Willis?"

"Ja, and André and Robbie."

"Robbie du Plessis? Oh my *God*." A squeal from the other side of the room.

"He had a scene with Cathy Biggs."

"Cathy *Biggs*?"

"Weird hey?"

"Anyway, Trevor said they might hitch here tomorrow."

Breathless giggling. Joanna lay rigid in her bag. Next to her, Leah was enigmatically still. Unexpectedly, a trap of loneliness opened beneath Joanna. She turned, pretending to turn in sleep, to face Leah – and found Leah's eyes wide open; but there was no collusion in them, no humour, nothing. Leah's gaze was patient, foreign, opaque: the gaze of an animal biding its time among humans. Joanna felt herself shrink away from a solitude larger than her own.

One of Leah's eyes closed in a slow wink. Then she turned her back on Joanna and did not move again.

Joanna lay for a long while awake, trying not to cry from loneliness, trying to imitate Leah's bleak inviolable stare. But she was weak, and cried silently, afraid to be discovered. At last her body dissolved away entirely into the damp salty darkness, and she slept.

She was woken later by the light of the full moon through the picture window. It was brighter than it ever was in the city, so bright she could read the face of her watch – two o'clock. Joanna shifted in her sleeping bag. She was wide awake.

She lay watching the other girls for a while, ranged like fat worms in their sleeping bags around her. She saw Jacky's arm draped over Charmaine's shoulder, their blonde hair spread and mingling on each other's pillows. The room was filled with stale shallow breathing, bare arms, silky hair, moist slightly open mouths. She felt a sharp scorn for these soft bodies, their sleeping scents and exhalations, their innocuous desires. She bared her teeth at them in the darkness.

The hard light of the moon summoned her outside; wild animals were moving in that light. She got quietly out of her sleeping bag. It was cold. In her T-shirt and bare feet she slipped out of the room, down the corridor, past the room where Jacky's parents slept, bumping softly into the second-best beachhouse furniture. She reached the door and went out onto a wooden deck that faced the sea. The air was filled with the distant plunge and rush of the waves against the rocks on the point. Between the house and the beach was a path edged by impenetrably dark scrub; beyond that a strip of sand burnt like a silver desert in the moonlight.

She sat for a while on the edge of the wooden deck, leaning against the railing with her feet up in front of her, gripping her toes. She took deep cold breaths, cleaning the stale dreamed-in air out of her lungs. She liked her feet, very white against the dark wood: the small evenly sized toes and their square toenails. With her nose between her bare knees, her arms goosebumping, she listened to the surf, vast and restless beyond the shining beach.

*I could go there now, walk alone along the beach as I have been told not to do; take off my clothes and walk up to my neck in the cold cold water. My skin would be the same colour as the sand: bright silver. Silver fish would come to see what was shining in the dark water. Seals and squid and sharks would swim near me, would touch my naked body with their cool skins; but I would not be afraid.*

"Leah," said a voice from the dark.

Joanna nearly fell off the deck. She sat up on her haunches, gripping the upright railing, staring out into the night. The voice came from the dark bush that bordered the path.

He stepped onto the lawn, into the moonlight. *Robbie*.

"Leah," he said again.

He carried a small square bottle in one hand.

"Hi," she whispered.

"Where's Leah?"

Robbie sat down heavily on the grass. Joanna stared at him. She was dreaming in silver and black.

"She's here."

He sighed, heavily.

"Come here, come sit by me."

He was talking too loudly. She stood up slowly.

"Come *here*."

"Shh, you'll wake them."

He turned to look out towards the sea, and drank from the bottle.

"You can see the ships, look," he said. "Come sit by me, look at the ships."

She stepped down from the deck and onto the grass. It was freezing cold. She sat down close to him, their knees touching. Robbie smelt strong and sweet. He was breathing heavily and staring out at the sea. With one hand he brushed his pale fringe aside, an oddly graceful gesture that made the chain around his wrist glint. She looked out into the darkness but could see nothing. When she turned back he was watching her.

"I've seen you," he said; "at school."

She stared at him. She remembered his body on the grass in the sunlight, his teeth clenched, his eyes – blind like they were now, glassy with alcohol and moonlight. She wanted to hold his head, pull him bodily back from that shadowy place. *He's just drunk.* She remembered the voices in the dim room the night before – *how many boys have you kissed...you know, all soft and slow...* Leah rolling back the edge of the pencil-case, pink like the inside of a human lip, to show his name...the pale-blue door of the shed swinging open and closed...she felt a black liquid shudder inside her, and allowed it to rise and move her forward towards him. She put her face up against his. She did not know kissing, she just wanted to feel the silver skin of his face against hers, to touch with her cheeks, her forehead...but his mouth was there, slightly open and tasting of sweet brown sherry. He pushed his face back at hers briefly with a surprised nuzzling motion, a soft click of tooth on tooth. His hand came up, icy fingertips softly on her forehead, her eyelids. She felt the bracelet against her cheek, so cold...then he pulled his head away and looked at her with sudden clarity.

"I'm going to puke," he said, and turned and crawled towards the bushes at the side of the house.

As he heaved, the back door opened and Leah stepped out onto the balcony, in dark clothes, her hair loose around her face. She stood with her arms folded, watching Robbie. When he was finished, she came briskly down the steps.

"Wipe your mouth," she said.

And Robbie wiped his mouth on his sleeve and followed her, straight past Joanna without a glance. They walked together down to the path and into the shadows.

Joanna knelt on the cold lawn, shivering in her T-shirt. She waited a long time until, in the distance on the luminous beach, she saw their linked black forms cross a patch of sand and disappear behind the dunes, out towards the point. *Straight through me*, she thought. *They never did see me.*

Suddenly too cold to think of anything else, she went back into the house and got into her sleeping bag. She lay touching her lips with the tips of her fingers. *I kissed him*, she thought. *I kissed Robbie du Plessis.* But knew that she was a liar. It was Leah's secret, Leah's story that Joanna had tried to steal a bit of for herself. And all she got was this fake sweet trace of alcohol on her lips; not even his real taste. It was as if he had not touched her. She tucked her hands between her legs and put her face into her pillow, hoping for different dreams.

■ ■ ■

Leah came back late the next morning, after the others had had breakfast. Her hair was loose and wet. She did not meet Joanna's eyes.

"Your hair looks nice down," said somebody. "Where've you been?"

"I went for a swim," she answered.

There was something new in Leah's tone, something almost...*exultant*, thought Joanna, watching her from the corner of the room. She raised her eyebrows knowingly at Joanna

as she passed, and smiled. Joanna felt a jealous sickness in her stomach and looked away. She was exhausted from the night before; but Leah seemed fresh and uncharacteristically cheerful.

When the others went down to the beach that morning, Joanna stayed behind with a headache. She pulled her head into the darkness of her sleeping bag, trying to sleep. Later, she got up and sat in her pyjamas reading old yellowing *Reader's Digests* that she found in the bookshelf. The day was hot and windy on the other side of the picture window, and her throat was sore. On the windowsill, a porcelain dolphin leaped from a porcelain wave. Its skin was a glossy blueish white and its eyes were too small, shiny and black like an insect's. Wherever she sat in the room, she could feel it smiling at her from the windowsill with those mean eyes.

By midday she was sneezing, and Jacky's father drove her back to Cape Town. On the way he bought her a coke and asked about her parents, and she was grateful for his dull easy adulthood. She could barely hear him with her blocked ears and nose, could barely hear her own voice answering; but it didn't really matter.

Relieved to find her mother out when she got home, Joanna went around to the back of the house and climbed into the twisted pomegranate tree. She sat in the highest branches, sniffing and sneezing like a sick child, pressing first her cheek against the bark and then her lips. The rough bark used to be too painful on the soles of her child's feet; but now she was older, and could climb right to the top. *I'm tougher now*, she told herself. She looked around: the garden was green, the hedge high and thick. She could hide here until Christmas, until next year.



# A boy in white

After the holidays, of course, they all heard the story: how Robbie du Plessis had drowned, his body washed up days later on the beach. He had been drinking; it was possible that he had had an epileptic fit while swimming. Nobody could explain why he had gone swimming in the middle of the night, in such cold weather.

People spoke about how his body looked when they found him. Jacky said he was completely white, with his eyes rolled right back in his head. But Joanna did not need to hear: she remembered his stiff clenched body, his blind eyes. Robbie dying, on the playing field in the sunlight in front of the whole school, and only her to see it.

Leah also did not return after the holidays. It was understood she had moved to another school. The others seemed barely to notice that she had gone: a face in the class photograph that later nobody could name. Only Joanna remembered how Leah had looked that morning when she returned to the house: her wild hair, her strange smile. But she said nothing.

*I couldn't have saved him, she thought. If I'd put my body between them it would have made no difference. I was less than air between them.*

■ ■ ■

She sat alone now in class, in the back corner next to the window – the traditional seat of ghosts who do not speak. She bit her lips and pinched her skin, as if the slight pain might prevent her disappearing into the air. Over and over, she wrote her own name:

*Joanna Joanna*; but it looked wrong on the page. The ink was too dark, too assured to fit the body that she felt was slipping away from her, leaving her nothing but a pair of eyes.

These days, she hardly knew what she looked like – averting her eyes from any mirror or photograph, refusing the image they offered her. But despite her precautions, she would occasionally glimpse a translucent figure reflected in windows or unanticipated surfaces. Pulling open the glass-paned door of the art classroom, for example, she would see her pallid reflection swinging away in a wild rapid arc like a flying ghost. It was less substantial than breath, a trick of the light cast onto desks and chairs.

She scratched bits of plaster from the wall next to her desk with the point of her compass, staring out into the sunlight as if to blind herself. Outside, the bamboos next to the playing fields thrashed in fury, like the necks of tall green horses riding into a storm. *Be still, be quiet*, Joanna told herself, wrapping silence around her like a skin of glass. *Shhh. Let them ride away*. She thought of Leah, her straight-backed calm, and tried to hold herself completely still.

■ ■ ■

One afternoon in the library, Joanna sat paging through the school magazine from the previous year. She almost didn't recognise Robbie in the front row of the team photo: a wet fringe combed back, a straight stare and serious mouth, his cricket whites immaculately clean. Joanna gazed at his face as if seeing it for the first time. He looked so young – but then she was a year older now herself.

When she tore the page out she felt a guilty sense of defiling the dead; but also the glow of secret possession. She cut him out of the picture and stuck him down onto a piece of

thick white paper. She pinched black ink and blue and green pastels from the art room at break, and worked at the picture during class, hiding it with her hand. She added shadow to the folds of his clothes, ballpoint black to his grey eyes. It was a week before the image was complete: a glowing ghost-boy in cricket whites, floating above a densely worked surface of pastel and ink that suggested deep water. For funereal correctness Joanna gave the picture a thick black border.

She pressed the picture gently with her fingertips, and would have put it against her face if her hand had not come away smudged with ink. She felt at once hungry and complete. She had changed him; now he was hers.

Joanna put the picture carefully into an envelope and hid it in her locker.

■ ■ ■

Months later, she was called to the headmaster's office one lunch break. The secretary handed her a long brown envelope; her name was written on it in a familiar crooked hand.

"Tie your hair up, young lady," said the secretary.

Joanna, gripped by the significance of the envelope, barely looked at her. Adults were increasingly misted to her, vague large figures moving at the edge of vision.

"Mm," she said absently, tugging at her messy ponytail with one hand as she left the office.

She went up to the top field, to where the shed had stood: it had been torn down over the holidays to make space for a new tennis court. She sat down on a pile of the old

bricks, careless of her dress, and examined the envelope. On the back was a Pretoria address. Something small and weighty slipped from end to end of the envelope as she turned it over. She tore open the top and slid the contents into her palm: a little mirror, reflecting the sky. Joanna recognised it immediately as the mirror from one half of the vanity set. The back was discoloured with glue spots where it had been pulled free from the silk, but the front shone. She tilted it in her palm, feeling it grow hot in the sunlight: a perfect circle of bright blue, like a piece stamped out of her hand. She did not look at her face in it, though; she was half afraid to glimpse a knowing yellow-brown eye, closing in a slow wink...

"So why don't you sit with us any more?"

Joanna looked up into the milky gaze of a girl whose name she momentarily failed to remember. *Kathleen*.

"Oh. I don't know. Don't feel like it." Her eyes fell back to the mirror.

Nonplussed, Kathleen stood with her arms folded over her chest, in the manner of girls who are shy about their breasts.

"What's that?" she managed.

"It's a mirror," said Joanna flatly. "It's a present from Leah."

"Oh...Leah." Kathleen was dubious. "What happened to her?"

"She went away."

Joanna raised the mirror and shone a circle of bright white sun at Kathleen: running it down onto her shined shoes and all the way up again into her pale eyes.

"Ow," said Kathleen, flinching. "Don't do that."

Joanna laughed and shone it in her eyes again.

"I don't think that's so funny," said Kathleen, turning on her heel and retreating across the grass to where Jacky and Charmaine, Nicky and Nikki sat discreetly observing.

Joanna guessed that she was no longer welcome into that golden circle of legs. She laughed again softly, turning the white light once into her own eyes. Then she slipped the mirror into her pocket and walked across the field alone. An afterimage of the sun floated before her, black against the blue sky.

# New names

She squatted on her haunches at the edge of the green dam, camera in her hands. The mild sun lit an elemental landscape: flat water, steep shore, the orderly verticals of the pines. Two men played frisbee silently on the far side.

Twenty now, Joanna was in her second year at art school. She had taken to dressing severely, in the manner of a Victorian widow – long dresses in blacks and browns, tight sleeves to her wrists, lace-up boots with pointy toes. She affected many heavy silver rings, less for their decorative effect than for their weight: she liked the sensation of strongly armoured hands. She had also cut her hair – very short, a number two razor – and lost some weight, revealing an underlying hardness that pleased her: cheekbones emerging like sandbanks when the river drops. She inked her lips with a dark blood colour, and ringed her eyes with sooty black. She liked to think of her body as a drawing on white paper, starkly bound by charcoal lines. By such definition she hoped to contain another self: that younger one, the messy schoolgirl who picked at her clothes and skin.

She had not lost the old habit of doodling in books, on furniture, on her hands; but her scribbles were more controlled now, geometric: cubes, hexagons, interlocking triangles. Complex figures, sometimes even constructed with a ruler like those maths problems she had never done at school. For her drawing assignments she produced rigid studies of tiny hard-edged things – stones, buttons, bolts and screws. Frowning, she held her face close to the page and pressed until the pencil nib broke under her white fingertip. It was exhausting.

Joanna felt very dark next to the other students' summer skins and clothes. She had been kept back a year at school, and so was at least a year older than most of them; but the difference felt like decades. They must have found her strange – with her sombre clothes, her small pictures, her silence – and she remained largely solitary. Years later she would remember her classmates as butterflies, yellow and white, fluttering on the edges of a circle of vision. At the centre, so much more substantial, were her own two hands, dark on light. The fingers had short ink-blackened nails and were heavy with the tarnished rings. They marked the white paper with decisive strokes of pencil, or cleverly loaded new film into her camera.

The camera had belonged to her father, a professional wedding photographer who had died from drink before her third birthday. It was an old and beautiful machine, its metal casing always cold, its action as solid as a gun's. Joanna trusted such incorruptible objects.

Kneeling at the water's edge, Joanna worked peacefully. She liked the neat shapes of the wet pebbles, the way the sunlight made them shine like glass. As she bent forward to examine one particular stone, something splashed into the shallows close to her: a day-glo pink frisbee, rotating slowly. Irritated by this intrusion into her greens and silvers, she hooked it towards her with a finger.

Suddenly, less than a body's length away, a man burst from the water and stood, dripping and frowning. With one hand he pushed the wet hair back from his forehead.

She felt it in her stomach: a lurch of recognition. *The yellow star dropping into the star-shaped space.*

He was a solid man with dark hair flattened onto his head by the water. His body made her think immediately of sea creatures, dolphins: hairless, streamlined, the bones

rounded over with smooth dense flesh. His head was heavily modelled, and quite still except for the eyes – which were incongruously sharp, like pieces of a broken beer-bottle stuck into the face of a statue. To hold this scratchy gaze, she lifted the camera and took a picture. Lowering the lens, she was startled by the transformation: the man's smile was brilliant.

"That's a nice camera," he said, looking not at what was in her hands, but at her face.

"It's a Nikon – an old one."

She held it in front of her for him to admire the delicacy of its parts, the shining metal that she hoped might deflect attention from her own stolid body. Feeling the slope of her shoulders, the weight of her breasts, the liquid movements of her stomach, she was ashamed. So she held herself quite still and tilted the silver body of the camera left and right in the sunlight, distracting him with its gleam as one would a child or an animal with a bright thing.

But he was only briefly amused.

"So. Can I have my frisbee?"

She handed it to him awkwardly. She wondered how old he was: twenty-eight, twenty-nine. Older.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"What?"

"Your name. I'm Alan."

He offered a damp hand. She hesitated, noticing square blackened fingernails, prominent veins.



“Anna,” she said, shaking hands perfunctorily.

Despite the lie she felt revealed, as if tricked into telling a secret truth.

“So smile, Anna. Can’t be that bad.”

He winked and toppled backwards into the water – a statue falling – and splashed noisily to the other side, where he sat on the bank to light a cigarette. Anna slowly dried her hand on her skirt. Her scowl softened as it passed over the man’s forehead, his naked chest. *A little moon of mirror light*, she remembered, *touching the skin*. And was that a glance, just a quick turn of his face towards her and away?

Abruptly she stood and climbed back up the steep bank towards the hole in the fence, gripping the roots of the pines. She had him now, in the metal trap of her camera.

“Anna,” she said as she walked home to her mother’s house.

She liked the sound: it had gravity.

“Alan. Anna.”

New names.

■ ■ ■

She loved the near bulk of the mountain behind the city, and often went alone up its slopes in the evenings after lectures, swapping her long skirts for baggy shorts. She had a favourite place, high above the city: here she could sit with her back to the big body of the mountain, and see Lion’s Head and Robben Island, Cape Town spreading to the sea on her right, Camp’s Bay on her left. Just before sunset, the swallows would fly in to

nest in the cliffs above her head, black arrows shot from a luminous sky. They veered recklessly into the cliff-face as if to smash their bodies into the rock, but at the last minute slipped into secret cracks, or swerved away again to take another sweep across the sky. The flock moved as one animal, hurling itself through the bright air, turning invisible corners with the precision of a school of fish.

Up there, she always imagined great creatures out to sea, leviathans just beneath the surface. She saw them rising tumultuously, causing tidal waves, chaos and destruction – all of Cape Town obliterated in the flood. Only she would be saved, high up above the water with the swallows.

Long ago, the sea had covered Table Mountain: one could find tiny bleached seashells up there, dry for a million years. And a century past there had still been black-maned lions on the lower slopes, rhinos, quagga. Walking, she felt the extinct beasts pacing next to her, the ghost tides welling around her ankles.

It was not considered wise to walk alone on the mountain. Accidents happened: the newspapers carried reports of hikers lost in ravines, scout troops stranded on rock ledges, hypothermia and broken necks; there were stern warnings from the Mountain Club. Occasionally, there was a second kind of story, of lone women attacked and sometimes raped in the lower stretches of Newlands Forest or above Rhodes Memorial.

Aware of these dangers, she never once felt that they might apply to her. Walking in the dusk on the side of the mountain, she felt invisible and at home. If danger approached in human form she would surely feel the change in the air, hear his shoe bend a grass stalk a hundred metres away, the insects telling. She would hide at the side of the road, or simply stand very still on the path, quiet, like a tree or a stone; and danger would walk straight past her with his clumsy human tread. She would be one of a

thousand pairs of eyes, in the trees and grass and in the soil; blinking, gleaming, shifting minutely to watch him pass.

But there was a third story. Solitary people one day unexpectedly taking to the mountain, up paths they do not know, in unsuitable shoes with no protection from the cold or rain. In the newspaper report the husband or workmate would say: *She seemed a bit depressed*, or *She had been having some trouble at work*, or *She seemed fine when I saw her that morning*. Days later, a sombre procession would carry a long plastic-wrapped bundle down to the road; or a helicopter would lift away from the mountain on a slow funeral flight.

When she considered, remotely, her own death, she imagined that the mountain might offer an acceptable end: the smells and textures as familiar as the smells of her own body, the contours reflecting the folds of her brain. She would lie down under a bush like an animal sensing death, in the sweet-smelling fynbos heat, one hand curled around a particular stone. Sometimes she could imagine nothing more peaceful. But she was sad for those other souls: lonely people from the suburbs abandoning themselves to some hard place high above friends, families, familiar things. How strange to meet death in a foreign country, in a landscape that is not your own. She thought of drowning out to sea, and shivered.

Whenever she saw the helicopters above her, she would pause and squint into the sky and lay a hand on her chest, just below the throat. She was not so much crossing herself – she did not need that protection – as softly sending her heart out to whoever it was up there, lost, in pain, afraid. And especially to those who lay entirely still, in hidden crevices, in secret places; while steps away the rescue teams passed back and forth, calling out their names.

# Alan

She saw him on campus, carrying a large sheet of aluminium across the art school quadrangle. The shiny rectangle concealed his head from her view, but she recognised his fingers hooked under its lower edge: those fingernails, short and blackened like her own. She was close enough to see her own reflection in the shivering scuffed surface of the metal as it crossed her path. But she became suddenly shy, and walked away quickly before he could turn to see her.

His name was Alan Saayman, and he had recently started work as a handyman at the art school. This coincidence she accepted without surprise: she had long expected such symmetry from her life. He stretched canvases for the students, fixed the photocopy machine, helped put up exhibits. Joanna – *Anna* – smiled at him secretively in the corridors. Each time, she could have shouted out with the thrill of the met gaze.

She found an excuse – a broken easel – to find him in his workshop, across the parking lot at the back of the art school. Through the open door, she could see a black space, thrumming with the light of a welding torch. A monstrous figure in heavy gloves and mask turned towards her, holding the welding torch in his hands like a futuristic weapon. He tilted back the glassy-eyed mask.

"I'm busy," he said, perhaps annoyed.

"Sorry."

"Come," he said abruptly, laying down the welding equipment. "Inside."

He was sweating heavily: she almost expected steam to rise when he pulled off the mask. The room smelt of petrol and paint; shelves to the ceiling were filled with tools, drill bits, electrical components whose names she did not know. There were a couple of broken-backed chairs, a pinboard, a paint-spattered kettle. Alan was moving paintcans and jars of turps off a trestle table onto the floor.

"My easel," she started.

He stood still, holding up a hand like a traffic cop. She waited.

"Anna!" he said at last. "I remember. Sit down. You like whisky, Anna?"

"Yes," she lied, as he took a bottle of Bell's from under the trestle table. He unscrewed the lid and poured stiff tots into two enamel mugs.

"Down it," he instructed.

She swallowed the liquid, holding her throat rigid against the burn. He poured her another.

"Smoke?"

"No."

He lit a cigarette and sat down opposite her, crossing his sockless ankles on the table next to her hand holding the mug. She could feel the heat from his skin on the backs of her fingers.

"So, Anna, all in black," he said, through smoke. "I've seen you around."

If she didn't return his smile, it was because her clothes demanded a certain decorum. She sat stiffly in the chair, feet together, narrow charcoal skirt to her ankles, rapidly

tapping the rim of the enamel mug with the ring on her middle finger. Her eyes passed to the pinboard on the wall behind him: a calendar, some photographs and cartoons. She put the mug down carefully between an oily rag and a broken drill-bit – the whisky a slow heat in the back of her throat – and stood to examine the pictures. They were always easier than conversation.

There was a portrait of a motorbike, lovingly framed. A bad surfing shot showed two tiny figures on the side of a grey wave. Another print, pinned high up, was a square of faded sunlight, holding two figures: Alan, about twenty years old with an army haircut, and next to him a taller, even younger boy. The army boy was pushing the teenager out of the frame, messing up his blonde hair. Behind them was a blue patch of water, a wooden dinghy pulled up onto the sand and painted red and blue. A happy picture: two boys fooling for the girl holding the camera, the girl whose fuzzy pink finger protruded over the edge of the lens.

But Anna did not smile. Her eyes rested on the face of the second boy: the one with the blonde fringe, the one with the fingers tangled in his hair. Because death was in the sunlight glancing off his skin; death painting the scene in blue and yellow and red, the childish primaries.

Because it was Robbie.

“What?” Alan asked.

“That boy. The blonde one.”

A pause.

“Yes?”

“Why do you have his picture?”

Another, longer silence before he replied:

"He's my brother."

"Robbie du Plessis."

"How do you know that?"

"Different surnames," she murmured.

"Different fathers. How do you know?"

Anna could only stare; at the face of the dead boy, and at Alan. *Of course, the nose, the eyes...* the two faces slid into one another, finding focus, the blonde hair and the dark, *but the same, the same...*

She backed away from the pinboard and sat down carefully. Everything was changed. She gripped the arms of her chair like an astronaut at liftoff, resisting terrible gravity. The room was cold with the chill of a moonlit lawn outside a beachhouse. The dead boy was in front of her, she could see his face clearly now, she was about to lean forward in the silvery light and kiss his mouth... *faces sliding together...* she felt a drag towards Alan as if her chair was tipping forward. She had to dig her heels into the floor and grip the arms of the chair tighter, to prevent herself falling upon him.

"I went to his school," she said softly.

"Did you know him?"

"Yes."

Alan nodded slowly.

"So you know that he..."

"That he died."

"It was an accident. He was epileptic."

Her chair fell back to earth with a soft thump.

"Yes I know, I know," whispered Anna.

But strangely, they were both smiling. She was staring at Alan's face, wanting to touch it, taste it, sink her teeth into it forever. It was Robbie's face, altered, older. It had been given back to her.

■ ■ ■

Anna began to visit Alan's workshop frequently between classes. What with the whisky and the turpentine fumes, her lecturers' words seemed very remote, and she had no patience with them.

In comparison, her conversations with Alan were vivid as dreams. She would lean in close to breathe his particular air: sweat and cigarettes, turpentine. She would watch his mouth as he spoke – running her eyes around and into that moist clever opening, catching a glimpse of the tip of the tongue, a glint of saliva on his large, even teeth. She felt her tongue flicking in her mouth in a curious unison that had nothing to do with his words. She imagined they were kissing secretly, standing apart, speaking to disguise the kiss from others.

Alan loved riddles, curious question-and-answer games:



*If you had a tune in your head, all the time, that never went away, which tune would you choose?*

*If you had to be frozen at one age, forever, what age would you be?*

"Nine, ten," she had answered without hesitation. "Anything before puberty."

*Would you rather have no legs or no arms? One arm, one leg?*

*How would you die?*

"Oh no."

"If you could choose."

"Not this again, Alan."

"But how? Would you drown, would you jump off a cliff?"

"I hate this game."

"Would you die from..." He clicked his fingers in the air. "From, from..."

Frequently, Alan would seem to lose track of a sentence halfway; Anna would have to find the words to complete it.

"Alan, what? Give me a clue."

He ran his hands through his hair with a moan. A short vertical line appeared between his eyebrows when he scowled – she coveted such little things.

"Ag fuckit, whatsitcalled, when you can't breathe?"

"Asthma? Suffocation."

“Ja, ja, suffocation!” He picked up a screwdriver and examined its tip. “Shit, stupid word to forget.”

Often his missing words seemed odd things to slip one’s mind: *Permission. Infinite. Submarine.* Once he forgot the word “nephew” for an entire day. Anna, who was vain about her own vocabulary, put it down to him not reading enough as a child. So far she had tactfully avoided comment.

“I hate forgetting things,” he said softly, surprising her.

She watched him warily, waiting for more. He started to nick at the edge of the table with the tool.

“Here, I’ll show you,” he said, leaning forward suddenly and dipping his head. “Have a feel.”

With one hand he pulled his hair forward, with the other took Anna’s hand and guided it to a spot on the back of his head. There was a depression in his skull, about the size and shape of the ball of Anna’s thumb. The bone felt thinner there, the skin hot to the touch, and there was a pulse – or perhaps that was the blood in her own fingers that she felt. Anna held her breath for four heartbeats, five; then gently withdrew her hand and folded it back in her lap. She looked into his face.

“What happened?”

“Diving accident, years ago. Banged my head on a rock.”

“Eina.”

“I think I struggle with my words now, more, since the accident. It’s hard to tell, really. I never was very...”

He wiggled the screwdriver in the air and looked around the room, as if hoping for something to repair.

“Verbal,” she finished for him, and he laughed.

Anna’s hand felt warm where it had touched his damaged skull: her skin remembered the shape of the scar.

“You were lucky,” she said. “It sounds like you could have died.”

“Nah, I wouldn’t do it like that. Not in a million years. I mean, would you? Would you die like that?”

She relaxed.

“I really hate this game.”

“But would you?” he insisted, but she could only shrug.

Death was far away.

# Sea creatures

“It looks like a lighthouse,” Alan had said, and she had imagined a tower out to sea, a round yellow sun, a blue wave curling like a pirate’s hook.

The reality was brighter and dirtier: a narrow tall building in one of those steep streets running up from the Muizenberg main road, painted white. When her eyes adjusted to the dimness of the entrance lobby, Anna made out mosaics on the walls: blue and gold seahorses, pocked with squares of brown gum where tiles had fallen off. In one corner, a spiral stair wound upwards, lit by a high window: a piece of light set into the wall, too bright to look at. At her shoulder, a seahorse stared with a glossy alien eye. Alan lived on the top floor.

On the first landing, a teenage boy sat under the luminous window, his back to the wall. He wore a pair of baggy grey shorts and a baseball cap turned backwards on his head, and rested his Nikes on a skateboard in front of him. Anna stopped in the still focus of his gaze: heavy-lidded, disdainful eyes, a shade of grey-brown just lighter than his skin. He had slightly parted thin lips, high cheekbones, one golden sleeper earring.

"Hi," she tested.

He stood, and she had to look up. His head suddenly seemed too small and finely carved to balance on such a long thin body.

“Your friend’s on the roof,” he said, snatching up the skateboard and moving past her.

“You go up the fire escape.”

He gripped the rail and vaulted easily down five steps, disappearing around the curve of the stair. Anna heard his shoes squeaking as he landed on the tiles in the hallway below. *Like boys I used to know*, she thought vaguely; *at school...*

She pushed open a door and stepped out into the metal cage of a zig-zag fire escape. From habit she counted the metal treads as she ascended – *eleven steps, turn, eleven steps* – and then she was squinting in the brightness of a chalk-white rooftop, like the bottom of a dry swimming pool.

After a second, she distinguished Alan: a shadow on the surface of the sun. There was a small shed at one corner of the roof, rising above the rest of the building like the cabin of a ship; he was painting its white door even whiter.

“So bright,” she complained, squinting at him. “I need shades too.”

He looked around at the sound of her voice, and stood frowning, holding the flat paintbrush daggerwise in his hand. His brown overalls were rolled down to his hipbones, his chest bare.

“Oh shit, is it that time?”

“Afraid so.”

“Let me just put this stuff away.”

Anna kept her distance as he rinsed his brush, methodically packed the tins and brushes away inside the room, closed the freshly-painted door and padlocked it. Then he turned and came towards her, wiping his hands on the backside of his overalls. His dark glasses were impenetrably chromed, and he had not smiled at her yet.

Unclothed, his torso was unnervingly broad – even broader than she remembered it from the reservoir, and different to the bodies of boys her own age. She almost stood aside, as one would move from the path of an oncoming car. But she held her ground, watching her distorted self approach in the lenses of his shades.

“Wait,” she said, lifting the camera between them. “I want a picture.”

“Jesus, do you carry that thing everywhere?”

“You know I do.”

She raised the Nikon to her face like a gladiator's mask. In the small frame of her viewfinder, Alan was immediately reduced. He composed himself obediently, taking off his shades and wiping the sweat from his upper lip, leaving a streak of white paint. Eyes closed, he spread his arms to catch the sun.

Anna lowered the camera. Barely thinking, she stepped towards him and laid one hand lightly on his chest. *The flesh of some densely muscled animal: a horse, a shark.* She kissed him formally on the lips, her touch as delicate as a shadow falling across his face.

When she drew back, there was a connection, a membrane stretched between them. He smiled – at last – and touched his finger to her cheek.

Then he turned and walked straight off the roof.

“Alan!”

But he was floating: she could see him from the chest up, and he was laughing. She went to the edge and looked down at him: his feet were on a ledge the width of a palm, and he was stepping down further to balance precariously on a drainpipe. Behind him, storeys of empty air. He held his hands up to her, grinning, not subject to earthly gravity.

"Come," he invited.

"You've got to be fucking kidding."

Holding casually onto the drain with one hand, he leant backwards into the void and regarded her with what seemed to be genuine puzzlement.

"No? Oh, okay...come round then. I'll open the door."

He felt with one foot for the windowsill, and swung his body down and through an open window.

Alone on the white roof, Anna raised her eyes to the sea: a blue slap in the face. She hurried down the fire escape and back inside the building.

■ ■ ■

Anna found the door to number six ajar, and pushed it open onto a floorboarded passageway. She was startled by her own reflection in a mirror on the end wall – distorted, too short and squat. She wiped a smear of white paint off her face with the sleeve of her dark shirt, immediately regretting the action, and looked around: two rooms to the left; to the right an archway leading into a living room.

Passing under the arch, Anna was distracted by flash and glitter, a sense of hot excessive light. There were mirrors everywhere on the walls: full-length, fish-eyes, slices and planes of glass balanced above the lintels like exotic blades. Otherwise, the room was almost empty: two surfboards stood against the wall beside a battered couch; a low table carried an ashtray and a deck of cards. In the corner was a telephone on the floor. Another archway led through to a small kitchen, and an open back door through which

Anna glimpsed the silver cross-hatching of the fire-escape. The walls were splashed with white and blue reflection. An open window held nothing but bright blue colour: half sea, half sky. There was so much light she wanted to sneeze.

The sound of falling water seemed fitting; it took a moment for Anna to recognise the noise of a shower. Investigating, she discovered a pair of paint-splattered overalls lying on the kitchen floor, keeping the bathroom door ajar. She paused at the doorway, light fierce behind her, water music ahead.

*Like jumping into a swimming-pool; like falling off a cliff.*

Quickly, she took off her paint-soiled shirt, her bra, her dark skirt, her panties and shoes.

*Don't think; and then it's done.*

She pushed open the door and entered the steamy chamber.

■ ■ ■

"What's your best dream?" he asked later, in bed.

Anna was feeling sleepy and pleased with herself. Sex – embarrassingly, her first – had proved absorbing, and only slightly painful. Alan's responses were a revelation: straddling him, she had been amazed by his racked back-arching, his look of driven distress. Alarmed by her own ability to provoke such sobbing climaxes, she had soothed him with small careful strokes. It felt like a shared secret: Alan's epic suffering, his difficult release.



"My best dream?" she asked, rubbing her hands. Earlier, feeling gentle, she had slipped off her rings and laid them on the windowsill. Now her fingers were unsheathed creatures robbed of their shells, banded with untanned skin. "I have a lot of good dreams."

"The best one you've ever had."

Anna was quiet for a moment. Then she said:

"There's one I've had often, since I was little. Probably the first dream I remember."

Rolling over onto her back, she clasped her hands across her stomach and frowned at the ceiling. She wanted to tell this properly, so that he would understand.

"Not so much, any more. But sometimes it still comes back, or parts of it. It's about the sea."

Alan would like that; that her dream contained a piece of his beloved ocean.

"I am a very young child, very small. I am walking with my father along the top of a dark cliff next to the sea."

As she spoke, she could not tell how much of the dream was real and how much had been invented over the years.

"I look down and the sea is dark and the waves are huge and I am afraid. But then my father says: *No, look more closely.*

"I try to look but I'm still afraid. My father says: *Look into it.*

"And suddenly there's a change; it's like those three-D pictures where you have to look *through* them, and suddenly you see the shapes? Suddenly the sea is lighter, more translucent, and I can see how deep it is and it's this beautiful blue, and it's full, full..."

She smiled in the dark at the ceiling.

"It's full of animals, fish and things...the colours are very intense, blues and bright greens ...some of the animals are moving so fast you can just see silver flashes, like scales or eyes. And some of them are big things that are just hanging there, whales, big...what are those ones with wings, they look like they're flying under water...?"

Although she knew, of course; she asked because it would please him to answer.

"Rays. Manta rays."

Softly, a thousand years away, Anna heard the whisper of a little girl in the museum, under the hanging manta ray.

"The whole sea as far as I can see is full of life...and the feeling...the feeling I have is like, *Oh*. Oh, I understand... it was there all the time and I just didn't see it under the surface, and I'm not afraid any more..."

Her voice tailed off into the dark and she lay for a while, dazzled by the remembered dream. Alan was breathing gently next to her, and for a moment she thought he had gone to sleep, but then he spoke:

"I wish I could dream."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't really have dreams...not like that. At least I never remember them."

Anna, still wide-eyed from her own jewelled vision, turned to him.

"You must remember something?"

"I don't dream...coloured things. My dreams are always grey, the same grey."

To explain better, he leant towards her on his elbow.

"They're like...stupid things. Really dull. Just grey. Like... an empty beach. A horse. A packet of razorblades. One time I dreamt a row of medicine bottles on a shelf. Just that, nothing else. They don't move. There's no colour. There's no...nothing changes in them."

"That's horrible," she said softly.

She felt him shrug in the dark.

"Ah, not really. Just boring, you know." He tucked an arm around her waist and lay close. There was a long pause. "When I was younger, you know, before the accident...the dreams were different. I remember dreaming other things."

Anna stroked the heavy arm laid across her belly, worrying the hairs between her fingers. Softly, she reached over to touch the scarred part of his skull.

"Is it sore?"

He shook his head.

"It's numb. I don't feel anything there."

She touched his forehead, where he could feel her.

"I wanted to study, you know, after school," he continued. "But I didn't get in. That's why I do that shit work, at the art school. And here, fixing up the roof and painting and stuff. They keep the rent low."

"What did you want to study?" she asked, cautiously.

"Marine biology." He laughed shortly. "But maybe I'm just stupid, you know? Maybe I was always just dumb."

"Oh no, oh no," she murmured, tender and helpless.

She fitted her hand over the shallow depression at the back of his head, and wondered at the foreign country inside his skull. *A grey beach. Razorblades* – police photos from the scene of some horrific ordinary crime. She hated to think of him venturing alone into such a world every night; she would keep him company there, had she been permitted.

But as long as she could touch him, track him like this with her fingers, perhaps he would be safe. He would not drift away from her into shadowy realms where ghosts walked and waves broke against invisible shores. He pushed his head back slightly against the pressure of her hand, and she dug her fingers into the roots of his hair, anchoring them there.

Gently, she put her face near to his, so that her eyes were over his slightly open mouth, as if looking for words. His lips stirred against her lids:

"That dream. I like it. Manta rays. That's nice."

# Mirrors

Anna started missing lectures: they no longer seemed important. She spent her days on the mountain, her nights at Alan's flat. They sat up on the roof, picking through those same riddling conversations: *What century would you like to live in? What animal would you choose to be? What animal are you now?*

"You go first," said Anna.

Alan, who was twisting a piece of silver wire absently in his fingers, laughed.

"You're a..." he paused, open-mouthed, searching.

He made a circle with the finger and thumb of one hand and put it over his eye like a monocle.

"What?" she laughed.

"...bushbaby."

Anna frowned.

"Why do you say that?"

"Ohh...don't know. I'm probably thinking of the camera. That big eye." His hands twisting and twisting the thread of silver into some shape she could not discern. "But me, what about me? What am I?"

"Some kind of predator," said Anna without hesitation. "Something fierce."

Alan laughed, throwing back his large head. "I *eat* bushbabies."

*Animals animals*, Anna thought. *Fish, snakes, birds; crying and hissing, fur and feathers.* She looked down at the road, the shops and houses. *In the sea there are still wild creatures; and up on the mountain, a few left. But here we are lonely; we must invent our own animals, down here.*

"I'm going to drop out of art school," she said abruptly.

She was in her third year now; still a year away from graduating.

Alan shrugged his assent: "So what will you do?"

"Well," said Anna, watching his fingers twisting the wire, "I thought that I could stay here for a while."

He smiled and tossed her a little silver object: a monkey-like creature with a spiral tail and eyes made from circles of wire. *Bushbaby.*

"What will your mother say?"

She shrugged.

"I don't know. It doesn't matter."

"Well good. Ask her for some furniture."

She smiled at that, and balanced the little animal on the wall. They sat silently for a while, Anna watching the sea. Today it was a heavy blue band on the skyline: one gigantic wave suspended over the houses, poised to break.

■ ■ ■

Her mother's heavy old pieces of furniture did not sit easily in the flat. They looked undignified in the modern light that came through the steel-frame windows. The chairs bore Alan's weight warily; only the bed seemed to take to him, growing wider and deeper to accommodate his broadness.

Anna herself had grown up in a Victorian house, and felt easier under high ceilings, with wooden sash windows that stuck in their frames in wet weather. She missed the floorboards in the old house, their knots and rings and fluid streaks. There were animal faces in that wood: beaks and noses, bat-ears, dark eyelike whorls that had watched her all her life, peering out of the substance of the house.

The mirrors occupied the flat, putting shine and movement into the corners of the rooms, waylaying her with unexpected planes of light. There were three in the bedroom, five in the lounge, two in the passage, three in the bathroom; one incongruously in the kitchen above the sink, where Anna could watch her face dissolve in steam as she washed the dishes.

Small fluctuations in the quality of the glass made all the mirrors distort slightly one way or another: the tall one in the bathroom elongated, while the one facing the front door greeted Anna with her own dwarfish caricature. The big bedroom mirror was fine, except for a small flaw at Anna's head-height that gave her a spiralling eye or, depending how she positioned herself, a whorl in the forehead or cheek.

Alone in the flat, Anna liked to wander from room to room: leaving her reflection in one mirror, finding it in the next. In the lounge she took off her stockings, standing first on one leg and then the other, observing herself in the glass. In the kitchen she unbuttoned her dress, raising her hands above her head, turning her torso into the light. In the bathroom, she watched her mouth move in the shaving mirror: *tall or short? Fat*

*or thin? Dark or light? Solid or transparent?* Finally erasing her face with a slow exhalation.

“Why all the mirrors?” she had asked Alan once.

“They came with flat. I could take them down.”

“No, no,” she had answered uncertainly, “I like them.”

But occasionally glimpsed out of the corner of an eye a woman’s pale face – not her own – retreating into the mirrored distance.

Superstitiously, she moved all the mirrors out of their bedroom, so that it was possible to shut the light out of at least one private place. In the first few weeks after she dropped out, she spent hours there – lying on the bed in the unreflective dimness, reading or looking at her old photographs.

These were laid out on the stiff pages of an album like a tarot reading, one that comes out the same every time: Joanna as baby, as toddler, as small dark child. In one, she stood in the doorway of her mother’s house, a hand propped nonchalantly on the doorframe, directing a look of trusting inquiry at the camera. She looked nine or ten years old. The house behind her was ambiguously shadowed, but she was a plane of sunlight, a bright child-shaped cutout against the dim interior. She seemed unafraid in the face of the world; her only hesitation the delicious pause of a child at the edge of the pale blue swimming pool, where the water hides no sharks or wrapping tentacles.

With a fingertip, Anna touched the little luminous oval of a face. *So much more to come.*

After that picture, the sequence was broken by a blank patch of several years: teenage wilderness, a region free of images. The ghost years, schooldays, the days of terrible



nervous light and disappearing body...she had destroyed the few photographs that existed of herself then. Landscapes she had also obliterated: sunlit corridors, the playing field and the summer grass. There were no reminders of these things.

Strange that she had felt so insubstantial then; because in fact she had always been a solid girl, deeply coloured, with dark hair and skin and eyes of an opaque muddy green. Or so she emerged, age nineteen, on the next page of the album: a stern plumpish young woman. She would have been in her first year at art school; still Joanna then, not quite Anna. In the picture she was looking not straight at the camera but off to one side, preoccupied. Something had altered her expression to one of stubborn fortitude, had deflected her gaze – something that lay between the child and the woman, an unmentionable patch the thickness of a page. She appeared to be waiting, arms folded patiently across her chest, for something approaching from beyond the limits of the picture frame.

And there, over the page, Alan arrived: bursting suddenly into frame, erupting from the green water in that very first photograph. After that, there were few pictures of anybody else in Anna's albums. With Alan, she had found her task, her theme, her sole and endlessly reconfiguring subject. Passport or poster-sized, he was her black-and-white, her brightly coloured, her matte or glossy lover.

She kept hundreds of prints of him under the bed in cardboard boxes, adding to them daily: Alan naked, doing a crook-legged handstand on the roof of the flat, sunlight on the smooth skin of his back and buttocks. Alan sitting astride the stomach of a sand mermaid they had built on Llandudno Beach, hands on her breasts, grinning. In his workshop, sparks seeming to spout from his half-open mouth under the welding mask. A close-up of his hand with its thick fingers and black-rimmed nails, like a heavy tool laid aside on the worktable, next to the chisels and hammer. From the back, his head

bent, one hand pulling the hair forward to reveal the nape of his neck. The back of his left knee, with his cracked right heel propped against it. An ambiguous fold of flesh – bent elbow? Thigh brought up against the chest? An eyebrow. Toes. An area of chest just below the left breast, with the suggestion of a rib rising beneath the skin.

The images became progressively more eccentric, more oblique, more narrowly focused: she was making a map, exploring; charting every square centimetre of her chosen territory. At times frustrated with surfaces, she wished she could find a way in through the pores, through the channel of the ear, the pinhole iris; to penetrate internal chambers. Such desires would cause her to shake her head and smile at herself; but they did not embarrass Alan – he welcomed her scrutiny. He loved to go through the boxes of prints under the bed, examining his own image: the top of his head, a shoulder blade, the base of his spine – all the views of himself that he had been denied.

Anna had inherited photographic equipment from her father: an enlarger, plastic trays to hold the chemicals. Alan fixed up the windowless shed on the rooftop as a darkroom, tacking heavy black cloth over the slatted door to keep the light out. Here she would sit for hours in the bordello light of a red lightbulb, fishing for pictures in the trays with a pair of plastic tweezers. She liked it up there: the close sweet-smelling air, her own softly glowing red skin, the secretive alchemy of the chemicals. She felt hidden, and safe, high up above the highest tide.

Because Anna was frightened of the sea. Of course it was Alan's chosen habitat, and therefore she had tried to understand it: standing thigh-deep in the cold water, hoping to be seduced by the salt sting and the undertow. But she remained afraid. Ultimately she came to regard the ocean as a personal rival, an enemy that she could not turn her back on. Sitting at the kitchen window in the evenings, Anna kept watch over the blue horizon like a warrior queen.

The mountain was her landscape: it possessed a more solid drama. Anna loved her solitary walks on its slopes, particularly on bright days just after rainfall. Clenching her fists for the fast uphill, she counted her steps: *one two three one two three one two three four!* On the downward journey, she ran with high loping strides, trying to hang in the air for as long as possible. This too was how she flew in dreams: with long weightless leaps, pushing herself off from the ground with every step. Exulting in the inclines, Anna seldom stayed on level ground for long.

Her calves became hard from exercise, her thighs powerful, her knees scored with fine scratches. Satisfied, she examined her bare legs, counting the grazes. She had always scarred easily, carrying marks on her body that recorded a life of petty accident: her first bicycle collision, chicken pox, early experiments at shaving her legs. She could read her history like braille with her fingertips.

"Feel," she instructed in the bath, flexing her calf to bring out the long shadow defining the muscle.

She took Alan's hand in hers and traced her grazes. His thick forefinger paused at a long scratch on her inner thigh, where a thorny branch had caught the flesh.

"You watch out," he said. "Look how you hurt yourself. You shouldn't go walking alone."

And Anna was wordless to explain how things were different, up there: that enormous tiered spiderweb she found constructed between two bushes, flies mummified in the silk. The antlions waiting in their fine-grained pits. The saturated blue of the sky, so blue you kept losing the specks of two hawks circling in it, the colour seeming to seep into the eyes.

*It is my country, up there. I am at leisure in my own landscape. I decide where to go, and when; I turn left and right with no-one's permission; I climb, I touch the rocks, I fall and stand unseen. I talk and sing to myself out loud, I lie down and rub the soil onto my hands or crush the prickly scented leaves. Nothing harms me. It is different, here in the city. Here only a few paths are permitted.*

She allowed him to wash her wound. It was only distantly erotic; but she enjoyed the slight stinging pain his fingers caused, his intense concentration. She wanted more scratches in other places, to invite him to touch with that same devout attention her ankles, her shoulders, her back, her neck.

She found it touching: that he might think to worry about her.

# Aquarium

Anna was twenty-two now, and languid with unemployment. The money in her bank account, including a sum she had inherited when her father died, seemed sufficient for as much of the future as she could imagine; but she realised that it would eventually be gone. Time passed effortlessly. She spent the days reading, or wandering aimlessly around town: the library, the Company Gardens.

She particularly liked the art gallery, where she had come to make sketches as a student. Her favourite part was the central courtyard, its cold drink machine and goldfish pond. She would sit at the edge of the pond, a Diet Coke balanced on its rim, and watch the orange fish circulating. When she dipped her hand in the water they came to taste her fingers. Next to the pool was a pair of figures in bronze: Adam and Eve. They were small and slightly built, this original couple, their foreheads level with her chest. Eve held out the apple in mild curiosity, and Adam thoughtfully regarded it, their faces impassive and innocent. There was no sense of urgency, barely of temptation. If there was a serpent in this garden, it was an innocent beast; the Fall only mildly distressing. Anna laid a friendly hand on Eve's knee and felt soothed.

She also visited the old museum, which had been renovated out of recognition. The hanging whale skeletons her only point of reference, she tried to find her way back to that blue shark-filled chamber; but the narrow stairway had been boarded up. Behind it was a classroom where bones and fossils lay on tables for children to touch. She noted this with disapproval, remembering the austerity of the display cases that she had loved as a child, their contents more precious for being out of reach.

She bought a small plastic dinosaur in the museum shop – mustard yellow, with bright green eyes. Its fierce gaze reminded her of Alan's, and she smiled at the shop assistant. A friendly woman in her mid-twenties, she seemed curiously familiar: blonde hair cut in a straight bob, those pale eyelashes that gave her face a naked look...

"Jacky?"

Jacky peered back at her uncertainly.

"...Joanna?"

"Anna now – I changed my name."

Jacky had been in London; was married, had a child. They complimented each other's appearance and swapped gossip: about Charlene, who was a TV soap star now; and Patrick, who died in that car crash. Anna could barely remember their faces.

"And you, what have you been doing?"

Anna explained that she had been studying, and was now looking for work. It sounded so reasonable that it felt like a lie. With her long black skirt, her crewcut and her fistfuls of rings, she felt both ancient and juvenile.

"And is there someone special in your life?" asked Jacky brightly.

She started to laugh, but controlled herself.

"Actually I'm living with my boyfriend."

But still, she had to smile: *boyfriend*. It was probably the first time she had called him that. For her, he was never *boyfriend*, or *lover*, or even *Alan*. When they were together he was *you*. Otherwise he was just *him*: the other one, the one who was not her.

"No wedding bells, then?"

"Oh god, no."

In her head, Anna was feeling the presence of a schoolgirl with a dirty dress, sneering and sulking. She ignored her, as one should a naughty child. But unable to leave the past altogether alone, before leaving the shop she had to ask:

"There used to be a room here, long ago, with sharks in it? Models, hanging from the roof?"

Jacky shook her head doubtfully.

"No. Before my time, I'm afraid. They've changed everything around. But you know, you should try the aquarium. They've got real sharks there. It's nice for the kids."

As she walked back through the formal gardens in the sunlight, past people eating their lunch on the grass between the statues of horses and naked men, Anna glowed with the pleasure of this ordinary exchange. She felt heavy pieces of childhood sloughing off her like glacial ice melting. *Was I wrong?* she thought, examining her school memories, so filled with longing and dread. That all seemed so far-fetched now, so distant and unlikely. *Was all that terrible light, the fraught loneliness, was it all in my head? Were we all just nice little girls?*

■ ■ ■

Anna had always been susceptible to superstition. When, soon after her conversation with Jacky, she saw the tiny ad in the classifieds, she recognised it as a certain sign.

The aquarium needed a photographer, part-time, to take pictures for their in-house magazine, *Aqua*. A laughably small salary; to start at once.

Ambushing herself with a burst of efficiency, she typed up a CV on her mother's antique typewriter. It did not take long: her qualifications were sparse to say the least. Feeling ill, she stapled the two meagre pages together.

Grimly she took stock in the bathroom mirror: her hair stuck up at odd angles, there was a pimple on the side of her nose, and her clothes were from the Salvation Army shop. She ran a hand through her hair, considered lipstick; lightly head-butted her own cold glass forehead.

*Fuckit*, she thought. Defiantly she folded the CV in four and put it in her pocket.

■ ■ ■

The aquarium was carpeted with something thick and springy underfoot, like the stomach of Jonah's whale. At first Anna was more struck by the sight of the water than by the animals held within it: here was the sea itself, tamed and chopped into cubes and placed on display.

She put a black hand against the side of a tank of rushing pilchards, and felt unreal and shadowy. She must seem like a wraith tapping on the glass sides of the universe; a ghost from the world of air. Looking around she saw that on all sides fish turned and coursed, sensing distant currents. *Living things*, she thought with awe, *with blood and heartbeats and eyes that open and close, down there in the deep cold...* over the PA system, whales were singing their sad and foreign music.



It was the predator tank that drew her, the big green jewel at the centre of the complex. Here, two ragged-tooth sharks swam around the central rock, their heads bleak masks. It was a few moments before the great opalescent ray came winging its way through the water, its body pale in the shaft of sunlight that came down from a skylight.

Between her and the animals, people were fractious shadows, too blurred and rapid to be real. Occasionally someone would take a photo, the flash bouncing back at the camera off the glass. The sharks swam on oblivious, their motion relentless and perpetual.

Anna felt her ugly mood dissolve in the blue twilight. She sat quietly in the amphitheatre facing the tank, watching the stately passage of the ray, and that of the slate-coloured sharks that flanked it. The animals coursed at different speeds, completing their circuits in some slightly off-kilter synchronisation: a complex cycle of slow rhythms that she could not follow, the winged ray in counterpoint to the sharks. After sitting for twenty minutes she came to anticipate the rare moments when all three came past together.

Anna hugged her satchel to her chest, feeling the hard weight of the camera inside it. She wanted to take the Nikon out right now and start on new pictures: not just of the animals, but of this whole split world – the tanks lit up like TVs; the dim human creatures pressing against the luminous windows, unable to penetrate. Her own translucent reflection in the glass, laid over the images of sharks and seals like a transfer.

Anna stood, determined. She had to get the job.

■ ■ ■

A disapproving ticket lady showed her through into a corridor lined with doors. The office at the end contained a desk, a computer with a screensaver of circling sharks, pictures and charts on the walls. Anna went in and sat in the swivel chair to wait for someone to come.

On the wall beside her was a laminated poster, showing sharks arranged against a turquoise sea: *Whale Shark. Ragged-tooth Shark. Hammerhead. Great White.* Next to the poster was a grainy black-and white photograph, which Anna spun the seat around to study. It showed a delicate perforated sphere, like a seed or the skeleton of an odd limbless animal, suspended in grey plasma. When she closed her eyes the image turned in her head. She wondered how big the object was in reality: probably invisibly tiny, impossible to pick up on the most careful fingertip. One would know the presence of such beings only when they were massed in their millions – a tint in the water when the swell was at a certain angle to the sun...

She became aware of a light mellifluous bubbling, and spun the chair again to find its source. There was a tank in the corner of the office; she rolled the chair over to have a closer look. Pressed into a crevice in a rock was a small rusty-coloured octopus, slumped in a heap of tentacles. Its eyes were closed to pearly slits, and it pumped water in and out of a valve with a snoring motion.

"They're very intelligent, you know," said a voice behind her.

She turned. The man at the door seemed to glow with a soft antique light: his lab coat, hair and teeth were varying shades of ivory.

"Hello," said Anna, rising from the chair.

"I'm the director," he replied, holding out a hand.

He was large soft-looking man, and gave the impression of being very clean: his white coat was spotless, his scent surprisingly floral. She immediately pictured him at home, in the bathroom, dusting himself tenderly with lavender-scented talc. Smiling at this vision, she took his offered hand – and found the softness deceptive. His grip was so firm it hurt.

While she introduced herself, he went over to the octopus tank and tapped his fingers against the glass. Smoothly, a tentacle roped out to touch the place on the glass with an inquisitive tip. The director dipped his hand into the tank to stroke the skin of the woken creature.

Anna had not known many older men. Their paunches, suits and razor-reddened skins had always seemed to her the plumage of some other species, far removed from her own. But she surprised herself with a shy liking for the director, and an eagerness to please. Spurred, she brought out the folded CV and some photographs – inevitably, of Alan. When she laid these items on the desk, she had the sense of displaying something intimate and inappropriate: a crumpled love-letter, pictures of an embarrassing medical condition.

She started to speak, haltingly: about herself, art school, photography, ideas. She talked and talked, arms folded tightly across her chest, not allowing herself enough air. The man listened to her speak in silence, rhythmically stroking the octopus, which seemed to have dropped off again. His own eyelids drooped, and but for the moving hand he might have been dozing too.

She ended on a nervous gasp, short of breath. There was a long pause. In the tank, the octopus dreamily encircled the director's wrist with a tentacle. The touch seemed to

awaken him from his trance: he withdrew his hand and fastidiously dried it with a tissue from a box on the table. Anna waited, cinching her arms so tight that her rings pressed painfully into the muscles of her upper arms.

"It's a nice octopus," she ventured.

The director nodded, dabbing a corner of tissue between each finger.

"Do you know how you kill an octopus?" he asked, smiling mildly.

"Ah...no."

"You turn it inside out like a glove, and then you smack its head on a rock."

Anna stared at him, appalled.

"That's awful!"

"It's very quick," he offered.

Then he crumpled the tissue and dropped it into the wire bin under the desk. The octopus had retreated into hurt sentience on the other side of the tank. Smoothing his white coat, the director sighed a lavender sigh and addressed Anna again:

"We'll call you," he said. "Leave those here," he added, as she moved to gather her pictures from the desk.

"Okay," she managed, blushing and hating. "Thank you."

She fled from the office, down the long corridor and out into the padded dimness of the aquarium. As she retreated through the maze, she imagined the glass tanks shattering in her wake, spilling their contents onto the carpet to writhe and die.

■ ■ ■

On the train home, she hung heavily onto the overhead rail, sick with shame. Her CV had looked as flimsy and disposable as tissue in the big director's hand. *Turned inside out, head smacked on a rock...*

Although, although; she had seen that hand dancing with the animal, its tentacles touching his skin with the tenderness of a lover.

Alan did not ask where she'd been. She told him she was looking for waitressing work. But at the end of the week, a woman from the aquarium called: she'd been given the job.

■ ■ ■

On her first day, before doing anything else, she went into her office and bolted the cream-coloured door. It was the same room, the one with the octopus in it. She sat herself down in the swivel chair and surveyed this new place: chair, table, computer...these were her things now. She had not realised how much she missed having a place in which to be alone. And this office was so unlike any she had ever occupied – so modern and correct, so soothing in its neutral shades. She got up and paced the length of the room: four strides across by five along. *So clean, so clean...*no scribbles, no scratches or scuffs, no evidence of despair.

Experimentally, she dipped her hand into the tank to touch the octopus. It considered, then wrapped the tip of a tentacle around her finger; and seemed to blush, just slightly, a deeper rose. Anna bit her lip in pleasure.

Finally, she lay down on her stomach on the uniformly fawn carpet, and breathed in the disinfected grown-up smell of it all. There was more peace here than she had had for years.

# In amber

That peace did not desert her once she started the job. It entered her every morning as she stepped off the Muizenberg platform onto the town-bound train, when the doors sucked closed behind her, glassing off the world. As the train gathered speed, the leaping springbok engraved onto the railway glass floated over the fleeing suburbs; shivering as the train changed tracks, following her like a patch of sunblindness in the eye.

At lunchtime she would sit on the pier and converse with the gulls and the big bull seals that hauled themselves onto the tires roped against the harbour wall. She was not afraid of the sea here: it was walled in, harmless.

Sometimes she would aimlessly window-shop. A childish part of her loved the pricey fakeness of the waterfront mall – so sweet, like ice cream. She dawdled in the marbled walkways, dusty and pagan in her clothes of black and bloody purple. There was a new spirit growing in her, a youthful one – she felt seventeen years old, young and light as she had never actually been at that age. She was sixteen, fifteen, fourteen. She bought silky underwear to wear, secretly, under her old black clothes; pearlescent lotions, skin cremes like melting butter...curios, souvenirs from the country of girlishness that she had never really inhabited.

They celebrated her twenty-third birthday on the rooftop with a bottle of red wine. Alan bought her a bright blue dress with a short skirt. Two years before she would have scorned such frippery; but now she immediately took off her old clothes, right there on the rooftop, and slipped on the new dress. Mesmerised, she spun the skirt around her

thighs. Against the white paint of the rooftop the fabric glowed, seeming to leave a blur of bright blue behind her when she moved. She felt she could jump straight off the roof and fly.

“Sexy thing,” said Alan; but his voice was shy.

Anna smiled at him uncertainly. She would have to practise this, this being young.

■ ■ ■

As summer approached and the afternoons lengthened and slowed, Anna became becalmed. Time was thick and yellowish, like treesap in which she was willingly bogged. Her body forgot its old twitchy restlessness – the jiggling knees, the picking fingers, the fretting at the substance of the world. Unchewed, her fingernails grew slowly longer: every week she would cut their little halfmoon rinds and lay them out in order on the top of her computer hard-drive, marvelling. Her mother used to tell her that it was dangerous to leave nail clippings lying around – witches could find them and lay spells on you. So Anna counted them carefully before carrying them to the staff toilet to flush away.

On the way back to her office, she would pause in the trapezium of amber light cast down from an undusted skylight, turning her face towards it like the head of a sunflower.

*If you had to be frozen at one age forever, what age would you choose?*

*This age, she thought, the sunlight pale red through her eyelids. This age, now, right now.*





One of Anna's jobs was to take school groups around the aquarium. To her own surprise, she found she enjoyed the duty: escorting teenagers into the presence of sharks, giant crabs and other regal monsters. She spoke to them in a voice that felt quite unlike her own: resonant, confident, measured. After exactly twenty-seven minutes, she would lead the children safely out on the other side, to air and sunlight and fizzy drinks.

Anna worked hard on her schools lecture: *Sea Creatures of the Southern Deep*, she entitled it, vaguely recalling the phrase from somewhere. She was earnest, even urgent when she spoke to the children; although herself not entirely sure what she was trying to impart. Mating seasons, diet, endangered status – these were all important, surely; but she also wanted to convey something simpler and more personal:

*Look, the curve of the seal's back; the brief jewel of the little fish; those long black-and-white-striped poison spines, how they sway, so slow and elegant.*

*Look, pictures, shapes.*

*See how many fierce and lovely things there are, out in the big world. Children, take heart.*

She thought often of Alan's frustration with words during these tours. Because on the whole her speeches were ineffectual: the children gave her back hard eyes like marbles, or ignored her completely. Once, while explaining external fertilisation, Anna watched from the corner of her eye a girl breathe onto the cool glass of the shark tank, and draw with her pinkie a heart in the mist. At that moment the great mask of a shark loomed beside her; but the girl, turning to giggle with a friend, did not see it slide past.

The kids seemed very young to her, and all so pretty. Skins were impossibly tender, eyes without pain; soft newborn things that would shiver and melt if you touched them. She bestowed particular smiles on certain individuals: stocky Joannas, slender-wristed Leahs.

Sometimes, a sulky Robbie would glare at her, hands in his pockets. Anna would note the pierced ear, the cigarette-pack bulge in the back pocket, the odd socks; and be entirely charmed by such details. Boys like that fascinated her – with their raw new bodies, their big hands, their loud mock-toughness.

*Was I ever young enough to find such children old, hard, desirable? But then, I have grown harder now myself.*

Always, they asked about the sharks:

*Miss can that one eat you?*

*Miss did anyone fall in the tank ever?*

They really loved the sharks, those boys.

■ ■ ■

Going home in the evenings, the train trip seemed a long and perilous journey. As she approached Muizenberg, Anna could feel the layers of atmosphere thickening above her, descending, loaded with spray and darkness. In places, when the sea was rough, the water washed over the tracks and smacked up against the windows of the train, startling unwary passengers with its violence. At home, Alan waited like a secret, like an unopened birthday gift, like a wild bird she had locked in her bedroom.

He was working less frequently now – going in to the art school only two or three times a week, coming home early in the afternoon. She had little idea of what he did all day: he had few friends, he did not read or even watch TV, and his daydreams were as impenetrable as his night-time ones. She knew that he did odd jobs around the building, and that he surfed and swam; but these things did not interest her.

Pacing the corridors of the aquarium, placing her feet carefully inside the lines on the carpet, she thought about him; turning his body in her head, examining him from different angles. In her mind's eye he did not move; he was always quite still. She saw him balanced on the very edge of the roof, arms outstretched. Or standing entranced in the mirrored lounge, watching his reflection recede forever.

He waited for her in darkness. On her return, as her hand turned the front door key, the lights came on in the flat; and Alan woke like a prince from his fairy sleep.

She worried, vaguely, that he would lose his job; or that he had lost it already and not told her. But a secret flawed part of her quite liked the idea of keeping him at home: close at hand, hidden from other people. Particularly from the glances of the little girls at art school: she had seen them slipping their eyes at him, the handyman with his heavy good looks and his dirty fingernails.

But money was becoming a problem. Because she did most of her photographic work at the aquarium now, Anna sold her developing equipment. The black cloth came adrift from the door of the darkroom and was bundled away in a corner; but the red light-bulb stayed, adding drama to the piles of junk and tools that slowly filled the space.

They spoke, awkwardly, of getting a housemate for the third room, to help with rent. Then retreated quickly from the idea and did not discuss it again. The thought made

Anna feel slightly sick: solitude was a habit she had found early in life, and was unwilling to abandon now.

She really knew no-one besides Alan. Sometimes she wondered how this isolation had come about; when, exactly, she had lost the ability to be a person among others. Occasionally – looking at shop displays, or taking her solitary lunch on a bench beside the water on a clear day – she felt an absence at her side, a space where someone else should be. Perhaps a girl of her own age, to whom she might casually turn with a laugh – to remark on the weather, the passing tourists, on this or that. Whatever people spoke about.

Sometimes, even now, she dreamt of Leah.

There was one dream, particularly, that came again and again. In it, she was in her usual place on the mountain, looking down on the city. But the tide had come in, and Cape Town was obscured by a sea of silvery mist that she knew was the ocean risen, coming to just below her feet. Robben Island was under, even Lion's Head overwhelmed. There were seagulls circling high above her head in the white air, but otherwise no movement except for sparkling trails of vapour rising and subsiding.

Then they appeared: Leah doing slow somersaults out over the edge of the cliff, and Alan, smiling and paddling near, beckoning her to join them. With dream strength, she reached out and grabbed his hand and pulled him out of the mist, which was cold like vaporous ice. She held her body against his cold one, and felt him thawing next to her skin.

But Leah did not smile or wave or draw near. She looked at them as a seal might glance from the surf at fishermen on the quay: with animal scorn. Before turning and plunging away into the luminous element, into bright inhuman realms.

Waking from this dream, Anna could feel quite hollowed out with loneliness; even though Alan slept next to her, skin to skin.

But those moments were rare. In bed in the brazen mornings, yellow sunlight on her skin, Anna lay amazed at her own joy: at her body's exposure, at Alan's gaze on her. At being seen.

Most of the time, it was enough.

# Ghosts

Sometimes ghosts return, years later, and walk straight into your house as if they had never been away.

Anna should have known. She should have felt Leah's approach in the change of weather, in the rise of the berg wind. This was the weather she remembered from school, although surely it could not have been like that all the time: a hot brightness in the air, blue dazzle off the choppy swimming pool. Boys uncomfortable in their blazers and ties, girls holding down their skirts with outstretched fingers, faces concealed by veils of hair. Restless weather, when you can't put your mind to anything.

And coming in on that hot wind was a small figure in a pale-blue schooldress, holding a little mirror in the palm of one hand, reflecting lost sunlight into Anna's eyes. Coming back through the years, down the long corridors of time, dead chestnut leaves blowing around her feet.

Berg wind weather; weather for ghosts.

■ ■ ■

At first there were just hints: teases, footprints in sand, shadows walking. One grey evening as Anna came out of the aquarium, she glimpsed a narrow figure moving quickly sideways between the people on the opposite pavement. Not immediately human, the figure resolved into that of a woman wearing tight dark clothes – skinny jeans, a dark jersey, a grey knitted hat that hid her hair. There was nothing definite to tug the cord of

recognition that ran up Anna's spine into the back of her skull, so hard that she felt her chin jerk up; just the way the woman looked briefly over her shoulder, a certain rapid precision in her steps. Then she was gone, descending into the mouth of the underground parking lot. Anna stared, as if expecting something to rise from the dark portals in a cloud of smoke like a pantomime devil.

*It wasn't, Anna told herself; it couldn't have been.*

The next time was on Camps Bay beach, at midday on a bright Sunday. Anna sat masked in sunscreen on a black beachtowel. Alan always laughed at that towel – *goth beachwear*. She scanned the surf, spotting Alan at last far down the beach, talking to a girl in a blue swimsuit with long dark hair down her back. She was as small as a child: Alan had to bend his thick neck to bring his head down to her level, like a horse or bull bowing to paw the ground. The girl stood very straight, her small breasts pushed outwards in answer to his chin's thrust, hands at her sides and her own chin tilted upwards.

She almost expected Alan to raise his arm and run a hand heavily up the girl's swimsuited side. But the stranger took a step backwards and with a flick of her hair walked away; and Anna could see she was different: too young, perhaps a bit plump, the hair too thick.

*He was only flirting with some girl, she thought, and laughed at her own relief.* She wanted to go to him, wrap him in the towel like a wandering child and take him home, away from the sea and its pretty ghosts.

Neither of the women she had seen was Leah; but each time she had to admit that her relief was tainted with something else, something strangely like disappointment. When she turned these incidents over in her mind they had an alien feel and weight, like stones

from another planet. She fretted at their ambiguous shapes, fitting them together in different ways. They had a certain taste of truth, or prophecy.



That Monday morning Anna sat sketching in front of the tall kelp garden tank, her eyes filled with its tan and green luminous sway. Looking into the water, she let her eyes unfocus, flattening into one plane the hypnotic movement, the fish hanging between the pale green-brown fronds...

And there, suspended between the glossy slender columns of kelp, was a human figure, a flat smudged shadow of a child under water. Anna's drawing pad fell to the floor.

As if startled, the shadow figure retreated backwards into the silky greens and browns. Anna realised that it was the refracted image of a person looking into the tank from the other side, a trick of the light making her appear to hang inside it. She wondered if it was a straggler from the school group that had come through earlier.

The person pressed four fingertips up against the glass, and then moved, trailing a hand against the luminous side of the tank. Anna watched those precise pink pads sliding, and waited.

When the woman emerged around the corner of the tank, she was reduced, small and clear and close. She leaned against the side of the tank, one hand flat against the greenly glowing glass. On the other side of the glass, little fish seemed to constellate around her head like a flickering halo. A large flat-sided fish with yellow lips briefly mouthed the place on the glass where the stranger pressed. She pulled her hand away and examined it, as if expecting the glow of the tank to have come off on her skin like fluorescence. The



big fish sombrely back-paddled, paused, and moved on. *Those fish never did notice me,* thought Anna, *even though I banged on the glass.*

Hidden in the relative darkness, Anna examined the woman carefully. She was small, with spiky, whitish hair, and she was wearing something that looked like a pair of pale pyjamas.

Carefully, Anna picked up her drawing pad. The woman looked around at the sound, noticing Anna for the first time. She came closer and peered at the pad on Anna's knees.

"How do you see in the dark?" she asked.

The voice was bold. Most people whispered in the aquarium, as if in the presence of religion.

"The eyes adjust," Anna answered, resisting the impulse to cover her drawings with her hand.

The stranger nodded.

"That's quite good," she remarked. "I thought you were just the tour guide."

"I am." The left side of the stranger's face was green-lit, the other half in darkness. It occurred to Anna that she must be similarly masked. "You want the tour?"

"God no." The woman's tone was dryly amused: "No more fish."

Anna felt rebuked. Alongside them, silver shapes hung silently, watching the stranger with fishy covetousness. The kelp waved, as if subtly trying to catch her eye.

"They told me you'd be down here," the woman said.

"Oh...were you looking for me?"

"Yes."

Examining Anna's face, the woman offered a hand. Anna took it. Cool skin, narrow bones, no returned pressure in the grip.

"Well hi," said Anna, awkwardly. "I'm Anna."

The visitor's smile was a sudden chalkmark against the dimness of her face.

"No you're not," she said. "You're Joanna."

A bubbling silence. The woman turned her face slightly, and her eyes caught alight, irises gleaming a fierce impossible gold. Anna felt recognition like a soft blow to the back of her skull.

"I changed it," Anna said at last.

"Ah," said Leah. "I've changed a little too."

# Snake

"This is nice," Leah said. "I've never been here before."

They sat at an outside table at the Gardens Tearoom. An enormous gum tree leaned over them, its smooth white branches like human limbs – bent elbows and knees, skin wrinkling where the branches joined the trunk.

Anna was staring. She was in the presence of some creature not quite human: Leah seemed to be contained in a soft glow, casting a pale light onto the polished knives and forks. She wore loose Chinese pyjamas of rustling corn-coloured silk. When she turned her head slightly to the right, a star-shaped nosestud caught a speck of light. Her skin was still tan and smooth – but paler than Anna remembered it, as if dusted with some translucent powder, and drawn a little too tight across the bones of the face. Her short hair was bleached pale and gelled into many tiny points, except for a few long strands that grew from her temples like delicate sideburns. The skin on the backs of her hands showed slight signs of ageing: it was finely tessellated, like the skin of a lizard.

But it was the eyes that demanded attention: they were a moist and radiant gold, an unnatural colour like wet metallic paint. Not human at all.

"My mother used to bring me here, when I was little," Anna said, remembering some indistinct summery part of her childhood that predated school. "There used to be these cats here, living in the bushes. They ate the leftovers."

"What sort of cats?" Leah was interested, serious.

"Grey and white, tabbies. Must have been somebody's pets, once. They had kittens in the flowerbeds."

Leah turned expectantly towards the shrubbery.

"Where?"

"Oh, I don't know what happened to them," answered Anna, inadequately. There was a moment's silence. "You know, I didn't recognise you at all," she said. "With the hair, and everything."

"Short's the best, isn't it?"

"And your eyes," Anna said, touching her own eyelid. "Are they...?"

"Fake, yes. Coloured contact lenses. Do you think they're creepy?"

"No, I really like them. Very striking."

"But you – you look just the same," Leah said.

Anna laughed shortly, offended.

"I was hoping I'd changed a bit."

"No, no, you really haven't."

Anna bent to push a folded paper napkin under one leg of the unsteady table. She found herself abruptly eye to startled eye with a pigeon looking for crumbs.

"Hello, you pigeon," she said softly, feeling about eight years old.

Leah's feet were positioned side-by-side under the table, as neatly as shoes beneath a bed. They were bound into thin-strapped golden sandals, with toenails painted to

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match. Anna elevated herself carefully above the table again, to find Leah watching her closely.

“So. What brought you to town?” Anna asked awkwardly.

Leah paused before answering.

“Actually I’m looking for work. I want to move back here.”

“Oh,” said Anna. “So...what work do you do?”

“Design. I make these composite graphics – like photomontages. It’s fun. In Pretoria I had a couple of nice jobs. There was the African Film Festival brochure – maybe you saw it? Very bright, the women in big pink skirts?”

Anna nodded.

“I think I remember that,” she lied. “Why Cape Town?”

A shrug, a hesitation.

“The sea’s here. I like sea imagery. Anyway. I thought the aquarium might be interested in commissioning something – some posters, postcards maybe.”

“I can’t say,” said Anna, defensively. “I think we have someone who does graphics already.”

“Oh. Oh well. It doesn’t really matter.” Leah brightened. “But it was worth the trip, wasn’t it? To see you, after all these years!”

“Ja, quite a coincidence.”

"No coincidence. I had to phone your mother to find out where you were working."

The thought of this made Anna uncomfortable. But confusingly, she was also touched that Leah had come to find her.

"I don't have contact with anyone else from school," she said.

"God no, not that bunch of little snobs," Leah said with sudden vehemence. "Jesus Christ, I hated school."

"Mm," Anna agreed, cautiously.

She picked up a butter knife and found her reflection in its blade. She didn't want to talk about the past. But Leah was determined:

"You know, you were my only friend back then. The only person who was anything like me. That meant a lot."

Despite herself, Leah's words gave Anna a fuzzy pleasure that she found slightly embarrassing. Unused to these rites of friendship, she smiled briefly and looked away.

"I hated school too," she allowed.

"Well. You must give me your phone number," said Leah, suddenly brisk.

"Oh, sure. Where are you staying?"

"I'm at a backpacker place," Leah paused. "It's awful."

"Well," said Anna. "We should...we can find you another place. I don't know..." she stopped short.



"I would love to be in a house. With space to work."

Out of the corner of her eye, Anna glimpsed a grey cat darting into the bushes. But she kept still, not turning her head to watch the ghosts at play. She waited for Leah to say more. Watching her own hands, Anna saw they were arranging the things on the table: straightening the salt cellar, touching the knife and fork into position. She put her hands into her lap. It felt as if somebody was turning a dial inside her head, tumblers clicking inevitably into place.

"Do you have any money?" she asked.

"I can pay rent," said Leah. "At least, a bit."

"Well then," she said, "I might just know of a place."

■ ■ ■

Through the wall, Anna listened to Alan's familiar clatter: clearing his throat, washing the supper plates. There were puzzling pauses, in which Anna could sense him breathing and thinking. Frowning at herself in the mirror at the foot of the bath, she listened intently. An impatient percussive tapping: a knife handle rapped against the aluminium sink. *Alan is thinking*. Now a slow pensive scouring – cleaning the frying pan perhaps – the sound suggesting a worried circular train of thought.

A heavy tread down the passage. Alan came into the bathroom, sat on the edge of the bath and put his fingers into the hot water at her feet. He gripped Anna's big toe.

"Ow, let go."

He moved his heavy hold up her foot, sliding his hand around the heel, up the ankle and the calf, backward against the short growth of hair on her leg.

"So, this person," he said. He lifted his hand out of the water and watched the soapy drops gather on his fingertips.

"Yes?"

"She's a friend from school?"

"She was my best friend," she said, realising the truth of it.

He was dribbling water from his fingers onto her breasts.

"And this would be for how long?"

"A few weeks. Say a month. Until she's found a job."

"And she can pay?"

"Definitely."

He moved his hand through the air and hung it above Anna's face, dripping milky water in her eyes. She pushed his hand away.

"When would she come?"

"Soon. As soon as you say it's ok."

Alan stood and ran wet fingers through his hair, catching his reflection sidelong in the mirror.

"Leah," he said, flicking drops off the tips of his fingers onto the bathroom floor.

"Why the hell not?"



Leah pulled up outside the flat in an old beige Mazda. Going down to greet her, Anna saw that she had changed from gold to black. She wore a black T-shirt with a high neck, and tight black leggings through which Anna could see the knobs of her hipbones. The flimsy sandals had been replaced by thick-soled black boots. Her nails were enamel black, and her hair, impossibly, hung in multiple thin black braids to her shoulders. Over her shoulder she carried a satchel of shiny black leather, in one hand an olive-green suitcase. Her eyes looked hard and brassy.

“My god, I didn’t recognise you,” said Anna. “Again.”

Leah was possessed of a curious playfulness:

“Wig,” she grinned, tugging at a braid. “Look, we match!” She stood up close to Anna, cocking her hip against Anna’s softer side. “Black on black. Such goths.”

Anna moved uncomfortably away from the bony pressure. She felt mocked.

“Is that all your stuff?” she asked.

Leah hefted the suitcase and nodded.

“I never bring very much with me,” she said. “But I steal the towels when I leave.”

“Ha ha,” said Anna, feeling a sudden tenderness towards her towels – new ones, in a beautiful deep purple. “Here. I’ll take the suitcase.”

In the lobby, she caught sight of their reflections in the glass door. They did indeed match each other: dark twins, the body and its shadow.

As Leah slipped quickly past her into the flat, Anna had a sudden cold sensation that she had made a mistake, done something irreversible. As if she had opened a box and released something dark and cold and lithe. She followed, closing the door behind her.

Leah stood in the centre of the mirrored living room, looking around with hungry eyes. Gripping her satchel, she looked like a refugee from some disaster where hair and clothes and possessions had been charred completely black. She closed her fake eyes in a slow blink, and then turned them on Anna in the doorway.

“And my room?”

“Through here,” said Anna. “We put in some furniture for you.”

Alan had found a single bed in the garage, and they had actually bought a second-hand wardrobe. Anna had put up some posters filched from the aquarium: dolphins and tropical fish.

“It’s small, but it’s nice and sunny in the mornings,” Anna continued.

Turning, she found herself speaking to an empty room. She put the green suitcase down and went through to the lounge. The back doorway onto the fire escape was open. Walking out onto the metal-mesh landing, she saw nothing below her; but above her on the next turn of the fire-escape was the black satchel, abandoned. She climbed past it. Coming out onto the roof, it was Leah she saw first, standing at the very edge. She seemed unaware of the drop behind her, flexing her back lazily and rolling her shoulders as if they were stiff. Her eyes were meditatively fixed ahead of her. Anna followed her gaze.

It had become Alan's habit to sunbathe on the roof: he was laid out on his back in the exact centre of the white concrete space, naked but for his shades. His arms were spread at his sides: a toppled statue, a heavy golden corpse. Sweat glistened at his temples and on his upper lip; Anna could almost see steam rising from his flesh.

"Who's that?" asked Leah, pointing with her chin.

"That's Alan," said Anna, embarrassed. "My boyfriend."

The two women stood silently for a moment, regarding the naked man. Alan lay entirely still, refusing to open his eyes. Anna started to giggle.

"Aha," said Leah. "Nice, very nice."

Laughing, she put her hand to her face and crooked her index finger, taking the picture with a camera made of air:

*"Click."*

# Losing touch

Already on the very first night, Anna noticed the loss of touch. It was like losing a sense, like the first veil of mist edging over the cornea, presaging blindness.

Anna ceremonially swept the kitchen floor and put a clean cloth on the table; Alan went down to the café for fish and chips.

"You want some fish?" he asked Leah on his return, unrolling the newspaper parcel on the kitchen table like a toolkit.

"I don't eat fish," Leah replied. "Or any kind of animal."

"Christ," murmured Alan. "Have some chips then."

"I'm not particularly hungry," said Leah primly, tucking a green scarf more closely around her neck.

Her head looked like a porcelain doll's, nested in emerald silk.

"Let's play cards," suggested Anna, alarmed by the sudden coldness at the table.

She set a bottle of whisky and three glasses on the table. Leah smiled slightly, not taking her eyes off Alan.

"I'm not very good at these things," she said. "What are we playing?"

"Hearts," said Alan, after a pause. "It's really easy."

Anna smiled to herself. Usually, *Black Bitch* was the name of this game. Alan was watching his language.

Leah drank her whisky slowly, with careful sips.

As they played, Anna noticed that the air between her own body and Alan's, only centimetres deep, seemed to cool by a few degrees. Tentatively, she placed her fingers over his knuckles on the table; usually he would turn his hand palm-up and curl his fingers lightly around hers; but now his hand remained prone on the table like a dead thing. Stubbornly, she left her own hand there, stacked awkwardly on top of his. He did not look at her.

"Anna, it's you to deal," said Leah.

She withdrew her hand from his and shuffled the cards.

"Not so hard," said Alan. "You'll bend them."

Silence as she dealt. She could still feel the coldness of the back of his hand on her fingertips.

"Clockwise," muttered Alan.

"I know that."

Anna picked up the cards, reshuffled, redealt. Clockwise. Then she sat with her chin on her fist, digging her spikiest ring into her flesh. She had appalling cards: the queen of spades smiling coldly in profile, the jack of clubs flirting with his thin moustache. They played in turn, the red and black characters telling out their small story. Casually, Leah won the hand.

“Fuck that,” said Alan – becoming, it seemed, less shy.

The next round, Leah dealt. Alan was pleased with his cards: Anna saw a little curve of satisfaction at the corner of his mouth, sharp, shaped like a comma or a cut fingernail. She had seen him crease his mouth like that many times, in moments of secret relish: running his fingers along the silky edge of a plank he had just sanded; or buttering a slice of toast in the morning, thinking himself unobserved. It was a feature of his face that, every time, ambushed her with tenderness; and also touched her slyly in the groin: in bed she would always watch – out of one eye, through her lashes, her face too close to his to see much more – for that little new-moon curve.

Now, unthinking, she put out her hand to touch the side of his mouth – in delight, in desire; perhaps also to hide its intimacy from Leah’s eyes. But he moved his head at the wrong moment, bending to put a cigarette to his lips: Anna’s finger went into his eye. His head snapped back.

“What the *fuck*?”

Frightened, Anna pulled her hand away, as Leah laughed softly from behind her cards.

“Sorry,” Anna said.

She held her cards so tight that her thumbnails bit into their plasticised surfaces. She was shaken; she could not remember hurting him ever before, not by touch. Touching was their most eloquent conversation. When she was sad, she could be comforted by standing behind him and laying her face against the muscles of his back; and he would answer by folding his arms, like wings, behind him to cover her. At night in the dark, she could put her hand directly onto that part of his arm where her fingers fitted best, or that exact warm place at the nape of his neck. Losing this sense of his body, of how to touch it – that would be like losing the power of speech.



She played a card at random. The king of hearts: a warlike and, in this game, a foolish card to play; but nobody was paying much attention anymore. As if seeing something happening far away, on the other side of a great valley, Anna watched Alan and Leah. Slowly, he drew from the meat of his fish a long needle of bone and held it up before Leah's eyes.

"Isn't that beautiful," he said.

Leah smiled coolly, her wig rustling against the silk of her scarf as she leaned back to observe the bone through narrowed eyes.

"It is," she conceded.

"Some things about an animal you can only appreciate," Alan continued, "when you eat it."

Smiling straight into Leah's eyes, he placed a forkful of the white flesh into his mouth.

Anna gathered the cards and shuffled, snapping their edges loudly with her thumbs.

"Another round?" she asked loudly.

"Oh, I don't think so, I'm pretty tired," said Leah, standing and smiling. "Thanks, though. I don't usually like games."

After she went to her room, Anna and Alan were left stranded at the kitchen table, the space between them littered with the wreckage of an evening: the empty whisky bottle, scattered cards, a few pallid chips abandoned on the chip paper. Anna felt embarrassed. To her own eyes, her skin looked greenish-pale and greasy under the fluorescent light.

"Whoops," said Alan, "I'm a bit drunk."

He crumpled the chip paper into a ball and tossed it at the bin. It missed. He got up and fetched it, sat down again in his chair.

"So," he said, taking aim. "Leah."

"I don't think we made a good impression."

"Fuck that," he said. "She's a stuck-up little bitch." The paper ball landed cleanly in the bin, without touching sides. Alan slapped the table in triumph, and the whisky bottle fell over. "I was expecting something more....I don't know, she's really...uh, what's the word?"

"I don't know."

"No man, you do know. Not stuck-up, exactly, more...more like...you know?" he persisted.

"I don't know," she whispered, drunk, her eyes ridiculously full of tears. "I don't know what you mean."

■ ■ ■

Leah and Alan were both asleep when Anna left the house the next morning. At work she sat in her small office, hung over, staring at the barely animated octopus. At eleven, she phoned home.

"What's she doing?" she asked immediately.

"Can't say."

"What, she's there in the room with you?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Everything okay? How's your head?"

"Mm. Fine, fine. We're going to go down to the beach."

Anna paused.

"You're taking her to the beach?"

"Is that ok?"

"Well...no..."

"Is it a problem?"

"Oh, no, no, that's great." She laughed. "Thanks."

Anna returned the receiver softly to its cradle. She looked down at her hand and saw that she had drawn a dog's face on her foolscap pad, with big teeth and squinting eyes. She closed her own eyes gently, and found on the inside of their lids a little picture: Alan and Leah, walking side-by-side along a brilliant beach, in a storm of golden sand.

■ ■ ■

But when she came home that evening, everything was different again: Leah was in the kitchen, chopping garlic with rapid strokes of a large knife. Leeks, carrots, some green things so exotic that Anna could not name them. Leah made no mess, scooping

garlic peels and carrot-ends with her left hand into the bin as quickly as she produced them with her right. On the kitchen table was a fresh tablecloth, a candle on a saucer, a bottle of expensive red wine. Anna felt she was visiting in some stranger's kitchen.

"Hi," said Leah with a smile. "I thought we could do a bit better than fish and chips tonight."

"This is amazing," said Anna, putting her bag down slowly on the floor. "Where's Alan?"

Leah shrugged.

"Gone out," she said. "I think he's had enough of me already."

The two women ate by candlelight. The vegetable bake was excellent, and the wine had no rough edges. Anna felt it sitting like a warm ruby in her stomach, still carrying the candle glow. They spoke about photography, art, the aquarium; they avoided the past. But eventually Anna asked:

"Do you remember Robbie? From school?"

Leah half-closed her eyes and shook her head sleepily.

"Robbie Du Plessis?" Anna pressed. "You must remember. You..." She stopped, unexpectedly embarrassed. "He was Alan's brother," she finished awkwardly.

Again Leah shook her head, peeling pale wax from the candle.

"I don't remember much, from that time," she said softly. "It was a bad time. I don't remember many people. I remember you. I remember that we were friends."

The ruby inside Anna's stomach rotated gently in internal candlelight, facets glinting.

"Yes we were, weren't we?" she said softly, and smiled at her hands on the tablecloth.

"We were friends."

Leah stood abruptly and started to gather the plates.

"Leave them, I'll do them in the morning," protested Anna.

"Oh, okay." Leah yawned, taking off the black wig and rubbing her pale hair so it stood up spikily like a sleepy child's. "Goodnight then."

"You're not going to bed yet? It's only nine-thirty."

"I need to sleep a lot. I've been very tired, recently. Things have been...tiring."

But half an hour later, there was still a light on under Leah's door. Anna tapped softly and pushed the door open a few centimetres. She was surprised to find Leah sitting cross-legged on the floor, naked except for grey panties and a pair of long grey socks.

"Whoa, sorry," said Anna, embarrassed.

"Yoga," Leah explained simply, without changing her position.

Leah's body was painfully thin: her breasts barely protrusions, deep shadows underscoring the ribs. She had covered the bedside lamp with a piece of saffron cloth. The colour reminded Anna of light shining through chicken eggs in an incubator: there should have been an embryonic heart pulsing at the yolky centre. On the bedside table were, mundanely, a contact lens case and a bottle of solution. Anna had idly pictured Leah storing her lenses like jewels, in a special casket; lined, perhaps, with strawberry-coloured silk.

"I just wanted to say thanks again for the meal, it was lovely," she said.

Leah nodded, and Anna retreated, smiling like a fool. But as she was closing the door, Leah spoke again:

"Robbie."

"Yes?"

"He was the epileptic one."

"Yes." Anna paused. "He drowned."

Leah's face was expressionless.

"You must remember," Anna continued. "That time at Steenbaai at Jacky's...you – we both saw him that night."

"What night?"

"The night he died."

Leah straightened her yoga posture and took a deep measured breath. She held it for a moment; then let it out with a long sigh, her belly caving in.

"No, no," she said, shaking her head and stretching her legs out straight in front of her. "I'm sure I would remember that."

Her expression was innocently puzzled. Anna had no response.

"Well," she said at last. "Anyway. Goodnight."

"Night."

Anna retreated to her own bedroom, troubled by uneasy thoughts. *Did I imagine the whole thing? Is Leah lying? Am I the only one who remembers? Deception,*

uncertainty, memory...she didn't want to think about these things, so muddy and shabby and sad. She wanted to sleep.

Alan woke her when he came home. It was very late, and he smelt of the world: alcohol and smoke, and other pungent things she could not name. She snuffed at his skin as he climbed in under the duvet. He did not speak.

"So how was the beach?" she asked eventually; but Alan's eyes were already closed, his breathing even and deep.

Usually, for Anna such quiet moments provoked the greatest desire: she would dip her head and delicately taste the sea salt at Alan's collarbone or below his ribs, the soft skin behind his knees. It was the taste of a marine creature brought up from the deep; not human. Falling asleep with her face against his chest she would imagine herself pulled down by that heavy smell and taste, down to a place of dangerous beauty, dark light, dense air.

But this night, she did not want to touch him. Instead she lay for a long time awake, watching his profile. Eventually he turned his head, and his face fell away from her like the side of a planet turning away from the sun.

■ ■ ■

This was how the days went. Anna left the house every morning before the other two got up; from work, she phoned home at intervals, to check on things. Oddly, it was always Alan who answered – it seemed he was spending almost every day at the house.

"Where is she now?"

"She's up on the roof again."

"Doing what?"

"She just sits up there. She watches the sea."

"Did you go down to the beach today?"

"No. It was too windy."

And she pictured, irresistibly, the two of them on the roof together in the wind: Alan naked in his shades, Leah doing yoga in nothing but her socks.

"Is it okay, Alan?" she asked, covering her notepad with intricate ballpoint. Her doodling had become in every sense mechanical: she produced neat diagrams of interlocking cogs, drivebelts, pistons. "You don't mind her being there?"

"I don't mind."

"Why does she never answer the phone?"

"Like I said. She's on the roof, mostly."

"I don't see why you have to run around answering the phone."

There was a long pause.

"So then don't phone every ten minutes," he replied.

Returning in the evenings, she would find Leah cooking. In Anna's absence the house grew mysteriously cleaner. It started to smell of new things: ginger, floral air freshener, incense, and other sternly feminine scents.



Another week passed, and Anna became irritable. One night she came home to find Leah in a nightgown of red silk, embroidered with many tiny jet beads. She was carefully positioning three tall red candles in a row on the kitchen table. Anna was tired, and annoyed by the theatricality of the scene.

“So how’s the job-hunting going?” she asked.

Leah lit all three candles, carefully. She shook the match out before answering.

“I’ve been very very busy,” she said, putting the dead match back in the box, and the box into a pocket of her robe.

She clasped her hands in front of her and observed the flames, satisfied. The beads glistened like tiny beetles crawling on the fabric of her gown.

“Busy with what?”

“Different things. Thinking about my life. Getting my head straight.”

“I thought that’s why you came to Cape Town, to find work.”

Leah leaned forward to shift the central candle fractionally to the right, smiling enigmatically.

“Oh, work...I’ll find it when I need it. I found you, didn’t I?”

Avoiding Leah’s eyes, Anna opened the fridge. Wanting nothing inside it, she poured herself a glass of ice water. Leah continued:

“And not just you. I think I was in some way looking for all of this – for this place, these pictures, Alan.”

"What's he got to do with it?"

"Well – it works well, doesn't it? You and me and Alan, the three of us living here together. It feels right."

There was a pause while Anna watched the sides of the glass mist up.

"Oh," she said.

Her own voice surprised her: so quiet and cold.

"Don't you think?"

"I don't know what I think," she said softly. She took a measured sip of water. It felt as if her insides were rapidly cooling and hardening, like wax. "Tell me, Leah. Why did you come to Cape Town? Why did you come looking for me?"

Leah seemed confused by the question.

"Because we were friends. At school, we were friends," she said, as if this were obvious.


"Oh."

Anna had another sip, feeling her lips go numb. She found she was enjoying the slight cruelty of the conversation. It was a new feeling, pleasurable even.

"We used sit together," Leah continued, almost pleading. "You were the only one who talked to me. Don't you remember?"

"I don't remember much from that time," she said, hard-hearted.

"But we were friends..."

"I don't remember having friends." 

She drank her water slowly, relishing it. But looking up, she saw that an answering chill had crept across Leah's eyes, frosting the gold. And suddenly the water felt too cold in her mouth: like a chemical, like something she should not have drunk.

# Theft

Anna did not sing or play an instrument. When she hummed to herself in the car or the shower it was simple stuff: bubblegum pop, TV jingles, Christmas carols from her childhood. Classical music she found difficult and excessively emotional. Her natural medium was silence.

So she felt affronted that afternoon, coming home to loud orchestral music – torrential piano, remonstrating violins – spilling out onto the landing. Anna squinted into the noisy glare: it seemed that all the doors and windows in the flat had been thrown wide open, letting brightness wash inside. She pushed her way into the lounge like a firefighter battling into the heart of a burning building.

Leah was standing in the centre of the room in her underwear. A tiny white vest did not come down far enough to cover her thumbprint navel; the cotton shorts were so thin one could see the shadow of pubic hair, even the cleft of the genitals. She was on one leg, birdlike, the left foot propped against the back of the right knee. Looking up, she took an exaggerated step forward towards Anna, stepping high over the photographs that scattered the floor, arms spread to balance. Her skin was lightly sheened with sweat, her eyes unfocused, painted impenetrably gold. She opened her mouth, and as she did so the music swelled to a brassy clash – a fierce golden sound that she appeared to release like the roar of an angel.

“What?” said Anna, into the din.

Leah bent and turned down the volume on the stereo at her feet.

"I said hi," she laughed, oddly breathless.

Anna lingered in the doorway. Her own clothes were dark, and hung heavily on her shoulders as if she had rocks in her pockets. Glancing at the mirror on the wall next to her, she saw that her eyes were deeply ringed with black. She had not slept well the night before, nor any night for the past week.

Shifting her gaze, she found Leah smiling at her.

"These are mine," Anna said flatly.

"I know, they're fantastic. And look, look what I've done." Leah was excitable, delighted.

"They're my pictures, Leah. You took them from under my bed."

"Oh, you don't mind, do you? Look, isn't this great?"

Leah had pushed the couch in the lounge back against the wall and laid the prints out on the bare floorboards. Anna was surprised at how many there were, how many metres square: *his back, his arm, his jaw, his foot*. Obscenely intimate things, exposed to such clear sunlight, and to such a brightly golden gaze. Pictures of Alan were interleaved with prints from the aquarium – mostly of the rays and sharks. A mosaic of different varieties of skin: soft and sandpapery, silver and grey, human and other.

"What do you think?" Leah asked.

"I think they're my pictures."

"Well, yes, but look what we can do with them...look how I've put them out, see – they fit."

Leah pointed with her bare toe. Her feet were long, delicately boned, as expressive as hands. And indeed, Anna could not deny that the images worked well together: matching textures, echoed shapes; correlations, kinship. Hard to tell, in some places, what was man and what fish.

"They're mine," she repeated, stubbornly.

"So, we can work together. Your images, my designs. We'll collaborate."

Anna felt ill.

"I don't know what Alan's going to think about this," she said, weakly.

"Oh, he likes it," said Leah. "Don't you?"

She looked up, over Anna's shoulder.

Alan came towards them from the bedroom. He was wearing a pair of old jeans, no shirt or shoes. He stood at Leah's side, her pointy elbow almost touching his hip. Their proximity to each other made the hairs on Anna's arms rise, under the carapace of her black dress. She stared at him in outrage.

"But they're mine, they're of you."

He shrugged.

"So what are you going to do with them? They'll sit under the bed forever."

*Vanity, weakness, treachery*, she thought; but could say nothing. The music had calmed down now, reduced to a single winding woodwind: oboe perhaps, she wasn't sure. She closed her eyes, and allowed the tune to lead her away down its narrow consoling path.



Now every evening Anna would return from work to find fresh monsters laid out on the lounge floor. Leah had started to make photocopies, multiplying the images with cancerous zeal. Her collages reminded Anna of someone tiling a bathroom floor: that dogged, that obvious. Here and there, some feature – hand or eye – would be tentatively touched up with Indian ink. But Leah did not seem to know how to proceed:

“What do you think, Anna?” she asked, fretfully scratching her shoulderblade with the end of a paintbrush. “What does it need?”

Five identical pictures of dorsal fins were laid out in a row before her on the floor, evenly spaced like the teeth of a saw. She had started colouring them in, very neatly, in pale acid green.

“I think it’s nice,” said Alan mildly.

“Anna? What does it need?” Leah repeated, ignoring him.

“How would I know?” Anna replied with dull contempt as she passed through the lounge on her way to the bathroom. “You’re the artist.”

The next day, Leah returned from the copy shop with another stack of paper: reams of repeating fins and legs and eyes. Soon she ran out of floor, and began to pin pictures up on the walls. When she had filled up the available space, she took the mirrors down, stacking them behind the couch. Anna, watching the bright planes being packed away, numbly did not protest. There had been beautiful things in those

mirrors once: they were where she had found a body for herself, a face. But that was all going now.

Without the mirrors, the room was less bright. The walls turned slowly darker – the photocopies like some kind of algae growing inch by inch across the plaster.

“Maybe you should go to an employment agency,” suggested Anna at last, arms folded across her chest, rings pressed into her biceps to remind her to be hard.

Leah, working cross-legged on the floor, looked up with some surprise. She held a cutting knife delicately between thumb and forefinger, as a hairdresser holds a comb. She was busy with photocopies of Alan’s eyes, nose, chin – arranging them into a dreadful hydra. A dozen eyes stared back at Anna.

“Oh, but I’m so busy here!” Leah smiled, neatly slicing the nose out of Alan’s face.

“Do you have any more pictures? I’d really like more images to work with.”

Anna put her hands on her hips and stared at Leah’s swift fingers with puzzled obstinacy. All the time, a small voice in the back of her head was saying: *she’s doing it wrong. I would do something completely different with that one, you see, like this...* It was a confident voice, knowledgeable, superior. She remembered it from art school.

“I don’t have any more pictures.”

“Well...can’t you take some more?” Leah continued patiently. “I really think we need some more...*variety* of imagery. More skin.”

Anna breathed in deeply, and out, slowly. *More skin?* She shrieked internally: *you want more of his skin?* But she just tightened her folded arms, until the grip she had on herself was quite painful.



"I'll have a look," she murmured, and went to her room.

Alan was there, lying on the bed on his stomach, his arms tucked awkwardly under him so that he looked like a man with missing limbs. Anna sat on the foot of the bed and ran her thumbnail down the sole of his bare foot to make it curl. He rolled over onto his back.

"Hi," he said.

"Have you seen what she's doing?"

He pushed himself up higher against the pillows, frowning.

"Of course."

"So...what do you think? Aren't they awful?" She was whispering.

"Um, I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?" her voice rose. "They're hideous! She's cutting my pictures up for no reason! Pictures of you!"

"She said she was designing posters, or something. Some work."

"*Work*? No-one's going to pay her for that crap! I bet you she's never sold a picture in her life."

"They don't look like posters," he said uncertainly. "But I don't know."

"Don't know what?"

"Don't you think they're quite...creative?"

"Oh, Jesus, creative! They're mine! *Creative!*" She hit his foot, hard, with her rings.

He pulled his legs up away from her and rolled on his side.

"Well jees. They're your pictures, you tell her about it. I'm sleeping."

"Alan!"

"I'm asleep."

Anna watched him pretend to sleep; then sighed and went back to the lounge. But Leah was no longer there. Suddenly Anna felt very lonely, with her reflection stripped from the walls – all those lovely silvered pictures of herself. She went into the bathroom and gripped the basin, leaning forward and staring grimly into her own eyes in the mirror. The rings underneath them were very heavy, her face pallid.

Behind her, evil magic shifted its leathery wings in the rooms of the flat: *bad spells, bad spells*. She closed her eyes and leant her forehead against the glass, wishing its coolness into her brain. *Smooth silver thoughts, slow smooth silver thoughts, slow as the passage of the ray, silver as the fish angling their flattened bodies in the blue aquarium light...*

A sound, metal on metal. Anna opened one eye to see Leah standing in the doorway, bearing in her left hand a paring knife. She smiled and licked something off it with a relish not reflected in her flat golden eyes. Anna sighed, rolled her forehead back against the glass, held her own ordinary gaze. She could not fight against this shiny magic; she could not even raise her voice against it.

"Food's ready," Leah said. "Come and get it."



These days, when Anna called home from work in the middle of the day, the telephone was seldom answered. Perhaps there was a fault in the line: it rang and rang, echoing into an ambiguous silence on the other end – whether the silence of an empty house, of dead people, or of mocking presences who refused to answer, Anna could not tell. Sometimes she thought she could hear strange submarine sounds on the other end: deepsea groans and hums, distant whale music; radar, telegraph clicks, listeners holding their breath. Or waves, a faraway sound; the ocean rearranging itself. Each time she waited for twenty rings exactly, and then hung up, unsettled.

In the margins of her drawing pad, her doodles were changing character. All by itself, her hand had started drawing hearts again. With daggers through them. And big drops of blood where the daggers went in. She put her head down and banged it softly on her desk, and laughed at her own damn foolishness.

She found herself unwilling to return to the flat in the evenings, to the complicated thickness of the air there. Always, Alan or Leah seemed to be either sleeping or eating: creatures of torpor and greed and – Leah standing one-legged in the lounge, the scissors shining in her delicate hand – occasional cruelty. She wondered what they did all day, to tire them so. Every evening, it felt as if Alan and Leah had receded further from her behind volumes of clear water, their forms shifting, eliding, playing tricks on her eyes. Sometimes she imagined, turning the handle, that she was about to swing open not an ordinary front door, but an airlock into a cold submarine world.

She started to delay going home. She walked on the mountain nearly every evening, coming down in failing light. She used Alan's car, so that she didn't have to catch the train home after dark.

Returning to the flat, Anna would smell of pine needles, damp roots and rocks. Her eyes would be dilated from seeing in the dark, her skin cool. The air in the kitchen where Alan and Leah waited would be oily with cigarette smoke and yellow light. They would already be eating, and would watch her enter in silence, food halfway to their mouths.

"You've got blood on you," Leah remarked severely one evening.

"Hmm? Oh, I scratched myself."

The blood on her arm was as bright as enamel paint. Her T-shirt was damp with sweat under the armpits and down the back: she had not been so willfully dirty since childhood.

"Pasta," she noted.

"Alan cooked tonight."

"Ah." She concealed her surprise.

"Good walk?"

"Fine," she said, smiling across the table at a neutral space between these two strangers. "So. Can I have some food?"

Distantly, she heard Leah and Alan speaking, but she did not understand: they talked of city things. Anna was far away, halfway up the mountain, suspended kilometres above their heads.

"Anna?"

"What?"

"I said we were thinking," said Alan.

"Oh."

"I thought we could take Leah to see the whales some time. They're...what's it called? "

"Calving," said Leah quickly.

"Yeah, they're calving. At Steenbaai, or Hermanus maybe."

"We could all go, make a day of it. It'd be fun," said Leah.

Anna ate steadily. They watched her in silence.

"So is that okay? Maybe this weekend, or the next one?" Alan asked.

Anna shrugged.

"Sure," she said, giving herself another big helping of pasta.

It tasted awful, of packet soup and salt.

■ ■ ■

Some nights Anna was tempted not to come home at all; to curl up in a dark corner of the aquarium and wait for morning, comforted by the nightlight of the green tanks. After hours, Anna would linger near the sleepless sharks: their constant movement always soothed her, like white noise. She would lean her hands and then her forehead up against the glass, the fierce creatures patrolling centimetres from her face. It was

like standing on the edge of a cliff, looking down at death so easy and near; kept away by nothing more than a sheet of glass.

She knew the sharks' bone-hard snouts well by now; as well as she knew Alan's face; and though she had never touched the animals, she knew exactly how their sandpapery sides would feel on her palm. Not as smooth as a lover's skin perhaps, but potently alive.

In sleep she was visited by strange new dreams: fishmen hanging in rustling gardens of kelp; Alan, transformed into a long white cartilaginous creature moving swiftly through the water, his eyes wide open and fixed ahead of him. That dream frightened her. And she did not like the one in which she waited on a beach, while Alan dragged from the sea the skeleton of a whale. In the dream she started to cry, and Alan came to where she sat on the sand. But instead of comforting her, he pulled from his mouth the long white splinter of a fishbone and gave it to her with a smile.

Waking, she would lie watching Alan through half-closed eyes. Wondering how he would look, perhaps, with a school of little fish passing through his face. Wrapped in bandages of grey-green weed. Sunk, perhaps, in deep water, tiny bubbles in the lashes of his eyes.

# Uncoupling

After work that Thursday, gripped by a fierce energy, she ran up the mountain without pause from the gate at Constantia Nek – so fast that her legs were shaking when she reached the top. She ducked under the fence around the high reservoir and sat for an hour or more next to the water, hugging her knees and watching the reflections, seeing creatures curling and crawling beneath the mirror surface.

A man made his way slowly down from the far stone houses, across the dam wall, and towards her along the rim of the water. His overalls were bright orange. He seemed in no hurry, pausing to toss a pebble far and high like a warning shot. Together, they watched it splash near the centre of the dam, and waited for the first ripple to touch the shore. Then he approached.

“You can’t come in here,” he said.

“I know.”

“Didn’t you see the sign on the fence?”

“I did.”

His uniform was brand new, so bright its colour hurt her eyes; perhaps he was wearing it for the first time. A pale-blue tattoo peeked from under one crisp orange sleeve, indistinct on the back of his hand.

“It’s not allowed.”

"I know."

"Sorry."

"That's okay."

She smiled at him, grateful for the correctness and courtesy of their exchange: so straightforward, so easy. She stood, and sighed, and allowed him to escort her to a different hole in the fence, which he politely pulled wider for her to climb through.

"Thank you," she said.

He waved, she waved back; then she started back down the way she had come. It was getting colder.

Darkness fell as she was halfway down the zigzag forester's road. The track was densely fenced in with pine trees; she could sense the warm bodies of birds asleep in the branches above her head. Scorning the miniature flashlight she kept on her keyring, she walked by the bone-white shine of the concrete underfoot. Her eyes felt huge in her face, hungry for scraps of light.

She nearly fell over the figure in the dark, and cried out. Her voice was immediately dampened by the wall of trees. The woman sat by the side of the path, her feet tucked together and her hands in her lap, as if waiting. Her face was in darkness. A piece of clothing showed from beneath her top, a soft white triangle under her chin. She did not move or speak.

"Hello," said Anna, her heart fast.

The woman said nothing. Anna felt in her pocket for the keyring. The torch's beam reduced the forest to a narrow well of light.



“Is everything okay? Are you hurt?”

The woman raised her head, showing a small thin face of indeterminate age and colour, a polished bronze in the torchlight. She was not dressed for walking: she wore soft city shoes, a pale dress, a knitted cardigan. Her hair was hidden in something dark, a hat or scarf. In the torchlight her eyes glistening yellowly like an animal's. Anna dipped the beam away from them apologetically.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

The woman pointed silently up the path. It was another forty minutes' steep walk up the path to the top, where the reservoirs were, and houses, and people living.

“Do you stay up there?”

The woman turned her head towards the darkness, as if she had seen a movement or heard her name called. Then she rose calmly to her feet, brushed off her skirt – the glint of a wedding ring – and without another glance started up the hill. Her footsteps were silent on the pine needles. Anna watched until the slight figure disappeared entirely into the darkness.

Anna switched off the torch; but the night had become frighteningly black. Turning it on again, she felt revealed – the pool of yellow light around her was intimate and slightly shameful, like something emitted by her own body. *Danger is here, is near*, she thought, straining to see beyond the limits of her own lit circle. She was no longer a forest animal, seamlessly part of the dark: something was looking in, into her room of torchlight that had no walls. She started down.

*Surely she must live up there, in one of those stone houses at the top next to the reservoirs. A forestry worker's wife, perhaps. Maybe she has missed a lift up; maybe*

*any minute now I will see the headlights of a truck beaming zigzag up through the trees, the engine shockingly loud, and I will stop them as they come round the bend and tell them to pick her up on the way. And they will laugh and say oh ja we know her, she is waiting for us.*

She could see the city now between the trees – points and rows of lights – but cloud was coming over the mountain, and it would rain that night. *Should I have followed her? Or offered her my jersey – she was only in a thin dress. Surely she could not get lost, not on this wide road? What if she is mad, wandering up here alone – a crazy woman. But why should she be crazier than I, here in this place at the same late hour?* As she came out of the trees, Anna switched off the torch again so as to approach the city in darkness, like a spy. Then she was at her car, getting into it, pulling away.

The rain started up heavily as she drove the long way to Muizenberg in the dark. She was frightened by the lights of oncoming traffic on the highway, wheels spinning up water. The landscape slipped past at ferocious speed, the wet bridges and roadworks racing towards some carnage, some savage rendezvous on the road behind her. Anna accelerated away from it. Her thighs and buttocks were clenched tight on the seat, her hands gripping the wheel as if soldered there – a metal person, compelled into human action.

The highway left the suburbs and lifted over the unlit tree-filled space of Wynberg Park. Suddenly from the darkness a man ran out in front of the car. His body was bent into the rain and his clothes were the same sodden grey as the road. Swerving to miss him, she glimpsed for the briefest moment his smeared face turned towards her – grey skin, dull unfrightened eyes. With what seemed deliberate anger he slammed a palm onto the roof of the car with a thud as he spun narrowly out of her path.

She corrected her skid and drove on, her feet shaking uncontrollably on the pedals. The man had disappeared in her rear-view mirror, slipping between the grey veils of rain. Chaos poured down with the rain: the world breaking apart, grey ghosts entering through the cracks.

■ ■ ■

Alan was sitting at the kitchen table, cutting into its edge with a silver penknife. She stood at the door, breathing heavily from her run up the stairs. He looked up at her, knife in hand.

"You're *late*."

The words escaped him violently, as if he had been holding his breath for hours. His face was finely creased, the skin a layer of glass that had been crazed in spiderweb lines. Anna was still trembling from the near-accident, and the room itself was tremulous, tables and chairs and photographs threatening to fly apart at a loud word. Feeling seasick, she sat down.

Alan was smoking: smoke seeped from him, leaking through the faults in his skin. As she waited, he stubbed out the cigarette in the glass ashtray in front of him, watching his hand do it as if it belonged to another person.

"Where've you been?" Crushing and crushing the end of his cigarette.

"Up on top."

Deliberately, he stood and went to the window. His body was massive against the square of evening sky, the penknife in his hand a narrow leaf-shape of brightness.

Outside, the world still gleamed with a soft pewter light; but here in the kitchen night seemed to be descending. Anna thought of pigment dissolving into a glass of water: darkness diffusing from him.

*He used to seem so bright.*

She went to him, and laid her hands flat on his back, feeling the electric hum coming through her palms: like laying her hands on a running engine, on the metal casing of a hot machine of many moving cogs. The room grew quickly dimmer around them, shadow furniture piling up around the real. Alan's darkness clung to her, smelling of smoke, paint, oil; of turpentine and fire.

"What's wrong?" she said.

There was a long silence.

"Nothing," he said at last softly. "Nothing."

Anna felt like crying.

"Where's Leah?" she asked.

"Asleep already. We're leaving tomorrow afternoon."

Her heart lurched.

"Leaving?"

"You remember. Steenbaai, the whales."

She had not remembered.

"I can't this weekend," she said. "I have to work."

"You were going to take time off."

"I really can't. You go; I'll come and join you later on."

He shrugged: "Okay. I'll leave my car for you; we'll take Leah's."

"Fine."

His muscled back and shoulders were rigidly still, holding onto what twisting secrets she could only guess. Anna bent and touched the back of his neck with her mouth. She felt the tension of his mouth as she passed her fingers lightly and blindly over it.

"I'm tired now," she whispered, suddenly too exhausted to think. She would face the further fracturing of the world tomorrow, in daylight.

"I'm tired too."

It was eight o'clock, ludicrously early; but holding hands like a frail elderly couple they went into the bedroom and stretched out on the bed. They lay gripping each other softly elbow to wrist. The angle of her arm was uncomfortable for Anna, but he would not let her go. After a while, when she was sure he was asleep, she withdrew her arm gently and tucked it at her side. *Uncoupling.*

She felt alert and cool, as if no heat emanated from her body; as if she had metamorphosed into something reptilian, cool-blooded, needing no sleep. She moved on the sheets with a rustling sound, as if she was shedding a papery skin. When the back of her foot touched Alan's leg, she pulled away, startled: his skin was so hot, burning up. Shadows lay in the hollows of his body like pools of ink – black octopus ink, or the pigment from one of Leah's little bottles.

She sat up and switched on the lamp. Alan's face was set into the severe absorption of the dreamer: eyes moving quickly under their soft lids. Not for the first time, Anna felt an impulse to peel back his lids and watch for herself his dull secret slideshow. Or did Alan have other dreams, lurid, kaleidoscopic; dreams he had never told her? She turned the light off again and lay back on her side of the mattress.

At three, sleepless, she rose from the bed. In the passageway, she saw a bar of light under Leah's door: thin and precious, like the light reflected off hidden treasure. So Leah was also awake, wide-eyed, listening to the night sounds. While Alan was away visiting his grey dreams, the females of the species were alert, tracking with their heightened hearing his every mutter and snore. He seemed suddenly soft and human to Anna; vulnerable to such wakeful cold-blooded creatures as herself and Leah.

She shivered, and passed through into the darkened lounge, careful to make no sound. In the moonlight, the photos laid out on the living room floor were glossy squares, like the shed scales of a huge glass-skinned fish. She could feel the eye of the sea looking in at the kitchen window. Although the sky was dark, the sea seemed to retain a thin greenish luminosity – the light of the deep world shining faintly through to the surface. Strange phosphorescent creatures swam down there: great fish, sea serpents, mysteries. Far out, the sparks of ships out to sea were coming on. There were some solitary fishing boats, and one fragile moving raft of lights that signified a cargo boat or battleship passing. Anna marvelled at them: people, alive, out there on the back of the deep. To her they seemed remote and mythic heroes.

The flat was quiet except for the tick and hum of the fridge in the kitchen, and the rough-edged beat of the clock above the couch: a brush slapping softly on a drumhead. And behind that, a bigger broader rhythm: the waves pulling in and out from the

shore. Anna felt for the pulse in her wrist: it seemed frail and inconstant compared to the ocean, to time.

She was suddenly afraid. Quietly, standing in her T-shirt in the middle of the dark lounge, she began to cry. And stopped again almost immediately: she never cried loudly, or for very long. She wiped her nose and eyes on her T-shirt and pressed her cold rings against her mouth.

Moving soundlessly back towards the bedroom, Anna saw that the light was out in Leah's room. There was something on the floor preventing the door from shutting – a dark spineless thing, a shed snakeskin. It was Leah's bikini top. Standing an arm's length away from the door, Anna stretched out a hand, and with the very tips of her fingers pushed it open: it submitted, falling away from her with a soft complaint.

Leah had pushed her sheets off, and lay on her stomach. Her body was lean and smooth and grey in the half-light. Anna could count the knobs of her spine, each cupped with a soft brushstroke of shadow. She could not see Leah's face: she had tucked it down into the armpit of one outflung arm, finding shelter in her own body – as cats do in sleep, and birds, and other graceful animals.

Anna moved her spread fingers back towards her face; and the door swung gently closed over that sleeping scene, following the movement of her hand. At that moment, a heavy rain started up, the loud drops on the roof a relief after the tense ticking silence. She could move freely now, without fear of being heard.

She crept back into bed next to Alan, and for the rest of the night lay dreaming and waking and sliding back into dream. The rain surrounded their bed with a constant rushing static, the sound of many tiny wings beating at the thin walls. At intervals in the night Anna opened her eyes and lay surrounded by the rain, watching the drops

melt on the windowpane, unstintingly renewed. They were the colour of pigeon feathers in the grey light from the street lamp. Alan's skin was the same colour in the underwater light, phantom raindrops creeping over the contours of his body. He did not appear to be breathing. Anna wanted to reach out a hand to check, but was afraid that her touch would wake him. Instead she lay very still, watching, until she could just discern the fractional rise and fall of his chest, and know that he still lived.



# The worm turns

The next morning, Anna became ill at work: an odd full feeling, like indigestion or anxiety. Shortly before twelve, she left for home. *The worm turns*, she thought, walking to Alan's car, pressing her abdomen with her fingertips. She had never really known what that expression meant, but that's what it felt like: something cold and slippery and alive inside her.

She got home to find both cars still parked outside. Peering through the windscreen of Alan's, she saw a girl's pale-green jersey, small enough to fit a child, lying on the passenger seat. The sleeves were rounded and naturally arranged, as if arms had just been withdrawn from their warm tubes.

Puzzlingly, the flat was empty. In the hallway was a neat pile, ready to go: Alan's rucksack, Leah's satchel, a coolerbag, a covered surfboard. Anna felt like a trespasser – these daytime rooms belonged to other people. The bedroom was in a mess: a full ashtray on the floor, the duvet spilling off the bed. Anna stared at its folds, queasily trying to decipher from its twists the history of the last few hours. It looked like the innards of a large bloodless animal that had died in the night.

Her stomach felt bad, so bad.

On the way through to the kitchen, she walked deliberately over the pictures on the floor, disturbing their arrangement. A hand of patience was laid out on the kitchen table, the faces of the kings and queens heraldically stern in the cold light; the eyes of the picture cards seemed to follow her across the room. Anna found two headache pills in the kitchen cupboard, and as she bent to wash them down with a sip of

tapwater, she saw that someone had left the back door unlocked. She straightened and stood for a moment, wiping her mouth with the back of her wrist and considering, before going out onto the fire escape.

She was alone in the silver cage; no-one above or below her, no bag positioned on the stairs like a signpost. She ascended towards a cold white sky. The roof was puddled from the night's rain. Uneasily, she knew she was missing something, some clue hidden in the familiar shapes and angles. Then she saw it: the padlock on the door of her old darkroom was open, hung neatly on the hasp. As she watched – as if her curious gaze slipped fingers around the edge of the door and pulled – the door swung slightly open, revealing a black depthless gap the width of a spread hand. Then it slammed shut again. The impatience of the action spoke of Alan's presence on the other side.

*A door in a dream, always approached and never entered.*

She went silently towards it and laid an eye to the painted wood, peering through one of the gaps between the boards that had once been covered in black fabric. The red lightbulb was off; the interior was an indistinct theatre of movement, dim shapes without substance or colour.

*Beasts pacing in a covered cage, a zoo stench.*

The cracks in the door let the sunlight through in narrow slivers. She saw a section of concrete floor, darkened with a slick of something wet – water or oil or blood. Then a sudden body: a thin line of light laid over a man's shoulder, altering as he turned, curving over his heavy cheek, nose, lips. It was a metal face, eyes slitted against the light like an angry brass Buddha. It opened its mouth slightly and licked its lips.

Movement again, reversals of position, flesh of a finer texture. A girl's back, striped with light: sharp shoulder blades, naked narrow buttocks like a boy's. She might be twelve years old. Her white vest had been pulled over her head and hooked over her thin forearms, as if binding the wrists. The man's big hands emerged out of the darkness to grasp her waist – the long middle fingers nearly touching across the small of her back. The man's fingernails were very black against the girl's skin.

The girl turned, and a stripe of light illuminated one yellow eye. She seemed to look straight through the crack in the door to meet Anna's gaze. Then, with the sound of a great gong being struck – some resoundingly heavy metal object falling over and rolling – the entwined bodies blundered backwards and sideways into the dark and out of sight.

Anna pulled away from the peepshow darkness, stepped back and stared straight up at the sun as if to burn the images off her cornea. *Robbie*, she thought; *oh, Robbie...* there was darkness in her stomach, behind her eyes.

She turned and fled down the fire-escape, down past the open kitchen door, feet loud on the metal treads: *eleven, eleven, eleven...* all the way down to the empty parking lot, blindly past the cars and on, up the steep road away from the sea.

■ ■ ■

She ran randomly, losing herself in sidestreets. At last a cul-de-sac brought her up against the thigh-high fence of a council play park. Here were the usual puzzling constructions: curving metal poles, painted bright red, yellow, blue – as if these were the only colours in a child's universe.

Playparks seemed such oddly cruel environments: jungle gym cages, bare metal slides that burnt the skin. That rectangle of tar beneath the see-saw was sandpaper for the knees, a hard pillow to crack a child's head. But now there were no children playing on the damp slides or sitting in the pools of water in the car-tire swings. The grass between the tar patches was untracked, frosted with raindrops.

Anna swung her legs over the fence of metal poles – red, yellow, blue – and traversed the grass, leaving a trail of footprints like rot. Diagonally opposite her, in sinister choreography, a skinny black dog crossed the far corner of the park.

As a child, Joanna had loved playing in tall trees; but her fearful mother had never permitted her to climb to the top of the jungle gym. That was where she went now: up to the topmost rungs. Looking down, Anna examined her feet, braced against a blue cross-bar. Her left hand gripped a yellow rung, her right a red – strange that her grown-up body fitted here so well. Anna tried to score a mark in the red paint with her fingernail; but it was tough stuff, thick municipal enamel, and she could not dent it. She put her head down on her knees and shut out the light with her arms.

She could not go back to the flat; but there was nowhere else. None of her retreats – the office, the mountain – could shelter her now. The whole city was not enough to outweigh what was gathered behind that cracked darkroom door. There lay a black hole, nothing less: something dense and dark enough to swallow the shining matter of the universe.

The face and the hands had been Alan's, of course; she knew them by heart. But she had not immediately recognised him, there in the darkness with Leah. He had been revealed as a stranger, conducting transactions in a new language, in a foreign place where she had never been.

*Alan, Alan, what have I fetched out of the past to catch you? To what country has she taken you now?*

After a little while, she could uncover her face again and look around. At the far end of the park, the black dog watched her with one eye, scratching its bony jaw with a hind leg. The park was not a bad place to be – she felt safe here, among these elemental shapes and colours. It was all mathematics, simple geometry: cubes, circles, arcs. The red and the yellow rungs at right angles to the blue. The merry-go-round, rotating around its fixed point. And of course gravity: a long hard fall to the tar. *It's all proof of something, some theorem I can't quite put my mind to; but it's simple, quite straightforward, if I could just remember...* The soft dazed voice of a teacher whose face she could no longer recall was speaking in her head: *proof of parallel lines, quadrilateral*. For the first time she recognised the chanting spell-like quality of the words, the calm of those precise constructions. *Pythagoras, hypotenuse*. She should have paid more attention in class.

She would wait, until she was sure they had gone and she could be alone in the flat. She would wait the whole day until nightfall, and through until the next day as well, if necessary. Maybe it would rain again. She wanted rain, to fill with its soft static rush the gaps that had opened up inside her head.

# Darkhouse

Leah's car was gone. Staring up at the windows of the flat, Anna imagined strange animals congregating up there, knocking down the furniture, peering from the high windows. The tall lighthouse had become inverted, a darkhouse, projecting beams of shadow from its windows. She clenched her ringed fists and swore when she realised: her keys were locked inside.

Round the back of the building, then, and up the fire escape: *ten steps, turn, eleven...* but the kitchen door was also, of course, locked. Irresolute on the metal mesh landing, Anna felt a cold prickle on the back of her neck as the rain started up again. Long hard shudders ran from her scalp down her forearms, lifting goosebumps. She climbed the last flight of stairs up to the rooftop. Out to sea, veils of rain proceeded across the surface of a grey ocean. She went to stand very carefully on the edge of the roof. Below her, only about a metre down and half along, the bathroom window had been left ajar.

*Just like getting into a cold swimming pool, she told herself: don't think at all for the moment of the jump. Then after that you cannot stop, even if you want to.*

Anna breathed deeply, turned around and, gripping the edge of the roof, lowered herself onto that impossibly narrow ledge, slippery with rain. Not looking, she felt for the drainpipe, stepped down again, and found the window frame with one foot. After prising the window further open with her toe, she had space to get the other foot onto the ledge...and was safe, sitting on the sill, air at her back, thighs trembling. She

slid in quickly. As she dropped to the floor of the bathroom she banged her elbow painfully on the edge of the basin.

She clenched her teeth against the pain, staring into the full-length bathroom mirror with the ornate gilt frame. It was the elongating mirror, the one that made her look leggy and lean, as if stretched like Alice by her drop from the roof. She waited for a long moment, listening, clutching her elbow, holding her own comically stern gaze. The silence was barely creased by the distant surf.

Something turned inside her with a heavy click, like the mechanism of one of those old-fashioned light switches: a single decisive motion, something falling with relief into place. Her stomach-ache had gone. She wanted to rest; but the bedclothes smelled of Alan's sweat and smoke. That darkroom zoosmell was also in her clothes, her hair, on her skin. It bothered her: it was alien, wrong, not her own. She took off her clothes and went naked through to the bathroom to wash the odour off.

Stepping under a cold shower, she let the water run cold mercury fingers over her back and between her breasts. She took handfuls of water and scrubbed at her belly and groin – in the crotch, particularly, she wanted to be clean, and cold. She rubbed herself dry with one of her purple towels – hidden in the cupboard under the basin so that Leah would not use it.

Also under the basin was a box of old things: facecloths, dusty plastic bottles of talc – gifts never wanted or used. Catching a glint of green glass, Anna dug down into the box; her fingers found a heavy perfume bottle. *Moon River*, it was called: a gift from an aged aunt, long ago, unopened. She pulled out the stopper and sniffed at the greenish oily smell. She poured some out onto her palms, and touched her fingers to her wrists and her temples. Cold and salty-sweet, like kelp. She hesitated, then picked up the bottle again

and anointed her ankles, stomach, thighs, arms, breasts. When she walked across the room to where her clothes lay, the alcohol in the scent evaporated off her skin like the vapour off dry ice.

Cool temples. Cool hands. Cool belly. Cool breasts, nipples like pebbles. She liked this chilled hard body: a fish, a frozen woman, a marble statue sunk beneath the surface of a lake. She would refuse to be warmed.

She dressed in clean jeans and an old T-shirt of Alan's that she had appropriated, faded red with a Chinese tiger in black on the front. Its striped tail curled over her right shoulder and down onto her back. The scent was still strong under the clothes: now she did not smell like Alan, or herself, or any human thing. Rather like some new being, young and raw.

She opened the windows to feel the freeness blowing in from the sea. There were things to do.

■ ■ ■

She turned her attention to the pictures littering the floor and walls. They did not please her. *All wrong*, she tutted as she paced between the images.

"Start all over again," she said, aloud.

She smiled to hear her own voice: it was new. Living with Alan, she had never spoken very much, or loudly. Sometimes she had imagined her own voice as the scratching of a hard pencil, a 3HH perhaps, the sketches she made with it so light they were barely visible. But this new voice was a different instrument. It had a dense melting quality, like



pastel, leaving a rich dark mark. One could not ignore such a voice. She laughed loudly and talked to herself: silly things, fervent monologues, jokes; those things she always should have said.

She stripped the walls and stacked Leah's stupid pictures in a corner. Then she examined Leah's materials, laying them out carefully in a line along one wall: poster paint, inks, pastels, knives, crayons, scissors, glue, tape, ballpoint pens, lead pencils, acrylic paint. It would do.

Crawling on her stomach under the bed, she unearthed her own materials from the old days at art school. The box was heavy, and she had to kick it along over the floorboards into the lounge. Inside was her flat box of charcoal, choked with black dust. She placed it next to the other implements. Under the box of charcoal, a small round mirror, the size of her palm. Anna picked it up, and caught a face briefly in its tarnished surface, one she barely recognised: an unkempt angry-looking woman with dark shadows under her eyes. She laid the mirror to one side, carefully, as if the glass had sharp edges.

Next, a large cream-coloured envelope. A cool finger of memory brushed, lightly, against the back of Anna's skull. She picked up the envelope: thick, slightly textured; unmarked. Her fingertips tingled, as if she could feel secrets wriggling like little worms under the skin of the paper. The flap had glued itself down with time, and she had to tear it open again. Inside, a rectangular piece of white cardboard. She pulled it out and turned it over, counting under her breath: *one two three*.

A picture.

It was not the solemn icon she remembered. This thing was a child's crude mess: black and blue scribbles, a paper scrap torn from a magazine and gummed to the card.

Most of the glue had come off, and the picture was flapped back to show the words of the article printed on its reverse. Carefully she smoothed it down with her thumb.

*Four five six.*

A little boy in his cricket togs.

The rest of the picture was a fiercely dense surface of ink and lead: deeply scored, the paper rubbed to a shine by the pressure of the marks. Here and there a gouge where the pencil lead had broken. Without warning, Anna remembered pressing the point of a geometry compass into her own forearm. She had forgotten how she used to do that; how she had once possessed such violence.

Now she laid her hand briefly over the picture – *a grown-up's hand: look at these clean unbitten fingernails* – and waited a moment, until the trembling ceased.

Then she placed the picture on the floor. Sitting back on her haunches, she rubbed her charcoal-smudged fingers on her jeans and sighed, staring at the face of the boy.

It was a powerful thing, this little picture. It was a bad spell.

She thought:

*I can do better now.*

■ ■ ■

“Red,” she said, touching the paintbrush to a photograph of Alan’s face like a wand of blood.

Pictures were coming to her quickly, and she executed them with a fierce focus. She was precise, controlled: with a steel ruler she measured between two points and scored a shallow incision with a stanley knife. The line connected a point on Alan's breast, through his nipple, to the dead centre of the eye of a fish in a different picture. A tuna fish: pelagic, of the deep sea.

"Geometry," she muttered in the fading light.

She rubbed black charcoal dust into the cut, like ash into a wound. If you did that to real skin, it would heal, the skin growing back in raised scars. In some cultures this would be considered beautiful.

The pictures were out on the floor again, but it was a different jigsaw puzzle now: a map of a foreign landscape, full of ambiguous structures, highways, earthworks, foundations. She was building a world, cutting and pasting and touching it up, inch by slow inch, like a particularly conscientious god.

Another image: Alan's face, forearm laid across his eyes. Lips sunburnt and cracked, drawn back from those white even teeth. Suddenly remembering him licking his lips in the tiger light of the darkroom, she filled that mouth with black paint. It dripped down onto his chin like blood. A childish thing, like drawing a moustache on a politician's face in the newspaper. Anna smiled.

Here, another: a large black-and-white print of Alan's back. His arms and head were tucked away out of sight, tightening the beautiful smooth expanse of skin across the spine. Around his neck, the links of a thick silver chain. Creeping over the left shoulder were four fingers of the right hand, with their four dirty fingernails. The tip of the thumb was a pale nub that looked somehow obscene, caught in the crook of his neck.

*Her hands on him, there, at the small of his back.*

With a long confident motion, she tore his spine right out of the photo. Clean murder, bloodless torture and dismemberment. And then a slower reconstitution, a recombination, a painstaking healing.

Outside, the wind was strong, and the surf sounded as loud and near as if it broke on the walls of the building. But she was safe in here: she had locked all the doors, closed the windows and bolted them. Nothing could enter, storm or animal or any other visitor. The phone had rung two or three times, but she had left it. The shrill sound, rather than irritating, added urgency to her work – like far-off sirens, or burglar alarms in distant houses.

She had brought some lamps from other rooms into the lounge and arranged them on the floor. But she left the main lights off, liking the play of shadows over the changing surfaces of the images. As she added layers of texture, the shadow patterns became more uneven and interesting, with lit ridges, dark cracks and pools. The glue and paint dried slowly, making the paper buckle like the surface of a small sea.

Just before dawn she curled up on the couch and slept. She dreamt a long heavy body on top of her, like a dog or big cat. She pushed her face and her hands deep into its hot fur, searching for the hollow, the weak patch, the site of damage; but there was none.

■ ■ ■

Waking abruptly in the late morning, she was immediately alert, with impatient hands.

She worked intently through the day, pausing only for cups of coffee and handfuls of dry muesli. In the daylight, the overall plan of the pictures seemed more organic: less a landscape or a map, more a diagram of an animal's body. She felt like a palaeontologist, assembling the bones of a dinosaur.

Now she saw that one long contour – that had seemed the night before to be a coastline, with bays and headlands – resembled more the gentle slope of a human hip and waist. And there, inland, those soft parallel strokes or bars, they could be the ribs emerging...

It was then that she realised she was making a giant's body, stretched out on the floor of the lounge as if asleep; his head faced the kitchen and the sea, while the toes of his right foot extended out towards the entrance hall. The tiny picture of Robbie was in the region of the heart. The rest of the body was still unclear: it required work.

She found other things to incorporate: pieces of one of Alan's cigarette boxes; a length of his silver wire; spare blades for his knife. Shiny things, curios and lucky packet trinkets. She took his shades and stamped them flat with one heel: they made a satisfying sound, the mirror glass shattering, the wire crunching under her sole like the body of a big insect. She found the little round mirror and shattered that as well, and knitted the broken pieces into the fabric of the picture – as if she was stitching together a fancy garment, a special suit for the giant.

As evening came, she lit candles and placed them at intervals across the floor, letting the white wax melt onto the paper. Although the windows were closed tight shut, the flames still discovered a secret breeze, making the pictures shiver.

That night, working by the small light of the candles, Anna began to sense that she was not alone in the flat. *There, listen:* a shallow breathing, very soft. Something

asleep, a big torpid creature; a lion lying dreaming on the double bed. A shark hanging in the bathtub, white, silent, moving its tail slightly side-to-side to stay afloat. Cats licking their paws in the kitchen. A snake coiled around the faucets in the shower, cold on cold. Creatures breathing, and others holding their breath. *Listen.*

Anna did not feel afraid. She was one of the animals now, prowling long-legged over the body of her lover, across the landscape of his skin; clawing at him with her nails, hissing, snarling. Looking down at the front of the T-shirt she had worn for days (*two, three?*), she saw the Chinese tiger reaching out a clawed paw to rake her breast. She felt hard, like there were muscles ripping through her skin, contracting of their own accord; like she could take someone's face in one hand and crush it. She felt *wild*.

■ ■ ■

All through the next day, Anna was plagued by the ringing of the telephone. Angrily she refused it; but it would start up again ten minutes later, in fevered counterpoint to her work. At last, late at night, it stopped.

In the fridge she found a days-old potato salad which she methodically ate, cleaning the last fragments from the bowl with her fingers. There was nothing to drink except water and a cold six-pack of Windhoek in the fridge – so she drank three beers, one after the other.

At last it seemed to her that she was done. She paced the perimeter of the lounge, examining her creation.

It looked like many things, depending on the angle of the gaze. From a standing position, it was a picture of a man, a giant. If she lay down and put her cheek to the floorboards to examine it from ground level, she was the giant and it was a country, with miniature rivers and valleys, and mountain ranges eclipsing others from the view.

But it was also like the floor plan of an ancient city, a city built in the shape of a man. All the houses in her city had had their roofs removed, and in each room and chamber and courtyard was a different thing: an object, a little dream, a tableau as bright as the windows of the advent calendars she remembered from her childhood.

Here, in one window: Alan, his shoulderblades fused to the fleshy wings of a ray like a submarine angel, two creatures sharing a spine. Here: Alan's body transformed into the gnarled hook of a seahorse from the waist down. Alan very small, lost in a jungle of sepia kelp. And here: his face, wrapped in weed; Alan, drowning, tortured, wracked by strange metamorphoses.

She went down on her haunches to be closer; she crouched, she crawled over the surface of her love, touching it with her fingers. *I made them*, she thought with wonder; *these animals*. The pictures seemed to move slightly, a soft malevolent rippling, twisted by unseen tides. A long snaking tail like a wisp of afterbirth; scales glistening. The images shifted minutely in the corners of her eyes, like a shoal of fish moving synchronously: a hundred sleek shapes flashing silver, all at once.

She stretched out on her stomach, belly to belly with the giant, the paint still wet. Right in front of her face was the very first picture, the one of the Robbie; embedded now, nested in pigment, paper, glue, time. She lowered her life-size face to his, the size of a fingerprint; softly she touched his forehead with the tip of her nose.

Sleep came easily that night: she lay waiting for it only a short time, stretched out on the map, the paper man, the city. As the last candle drowned in its own wax, she felt her brain spinning backwards in her skull like a fishing reel after the line has broken and the fish swum free...*backwards and backwards until it spun right off the edge of some hazy internal cliff and down onto a grey beach...*

And she was kneeling beside his body. Alan was naked, his skin the colour of the sand that had silted around him. Everything was the same grey in the silence: the sand, the flat sea, the sky. His hair was swept straight up like a black fan, as if he was falling through water. There was a residue of sand in his open mouth and his eyes were rolled back in his head. She tried to reach out and close his lids, as she had seen done in movies; but it was as if her hand had no substance – it was ghostly and translucent, and when she tried to move his eyelids her fingers could not find purchase on his skin. She knew with a cold dread that they were in his grey country now, with the horse, the medicine bottles, the razorblades: the dead gallery of Alan's dreams.

Power, dread, guilt.

*I have killed something..*

Looking up, she saw that Leah knelt on his other side. Her hair was wet and long, and she smiled at Anna with contained excitement, softly placing one finger on her lips. *Shhh.*



# Sink or swim

Anna opened her eyes in a room full of space and light. For a while she lay contemplating the regular golden lines on the flesh of her outstretched hand, before realising: it was sunlight, coming through the venetian blinds. The blue-veined wrist looked tender and delicate, as if it belonged to some other, younger girl.

She remembered lying in her parents' bed as a child, sun through the stained glass dying her skin in unfocused squares of red and blue. She used to imagine that the light could stain her permanently, and that she would get up and walk away glowing with those softly coloured shapes. She was half asleep again, wondering if they could do tattoos like that – just patches of soft-edged beautiful colour – when the telephone erupted.

And she was up on her hands and knees, heart racing as if a gun had been fired next to her face. When the ringing died at last, she found she was kneeling on an expanse of paper, naked. She could not recall taking off her clothes. Her body was smudged with paint and dusted with black charcoal, and she smelt strange.

She stood shakily and backed towards the kitchen archway. A shadow man lay at her feet, one arm outstretched, bruised-blue fingers almost touching her bare toes – as if in despair he had abandoned an attempt to crawl away through the back door. Now he was quiet, all the strength bled out of him.

*Did I do this?*

She remembered suddenly and with a vague heavy guilt the dream of Alan's body. The phone began again: a terrible sound, which she silenced by lifting the thing to her ear.

"Anna?"

The man's voice was harsh and impatient. She held the receiver a little away from her face and frowned.

"Who is this?"

"Me."

"Who?"

"Me. Christ. Why haven't you been picking up?"

She held the receiver even further away, then put it down on the coffee table, where it spat and hissed at her. She stood for a moment, waiting until the faint angry sounds were replaced by a steady buzz.

With a foot, she lifted one of the drooping paper arms a few centimetres off the floor. It was cool, and surprisingly heavy with its layers of tape and paint and glue. Somehow the weight made it seem more real, not just paper: the skin of a tattooed giant. Anna wondered how to dispose of this piteous thing – it seemed to demand last rites.

Eventually she bent it at the waist, and then folded the legs and arms back against the body: an ungainly parcel. *As corpses tend to be*. Holding it in her arms, she backed out of the kitchen door and climbed up to the roof, paper fingers and toes flapping against the steps of the fire-escape.

She laid the body out on the white plaster, formally, spreading its limbs to receive the sun. It seemed much smaller under the open sky. In places the painted skin had cracked, and some of the photographs were coming adrift. Kneeling, she laid her hand ceremonially on the textured surface, trying to summon some final words. She could think of none.

She thought: *I remember the smooth skin on his back and his chest, its warm flex and shift. I remember the intimate sounds that came from his stomach at night. His breathing. I remember how, when I ran my hand along his arm, the hairs would rise up on my own.*

But that was all. She tried in vain to recall something Alan had said, some thought that was uniquely his; but she could not put her mind to it. The only things that came to her were his colourless dreams: *a grey beach; a horse; a packet of razorblades*. It was as if he had left his body years ago, without her noticing. As if she had held a shed skin, thinking she had the snake. As if all she had known of him was what she could touch.

So she removed her hand from the cracked skin, stood and walked to the edge of the roof. The morning air was fresh on her bare flesh; she felt cool and strong and calm. Perhaps people could see her: some crazy naked girl on a rooftop. She smiled at that, and stretched her arms above her head. Under the stale sweat and perfume, her skin smelt of paint and pastel crayon. Those art-room fragrances – they used to make her mouth water; long ago now, long ago, when she was younger.

There was a great stillness. No swell, no breeze, no cars on the road. *Cessation; silence. An end to motion.*

And she very nearly let it go then: toppled, slipped, released herself to gravity. As easy as falling asleep. As a stone dropped in water. But a small voice interrupted:

*Not now, it said. They're coming.*

Lowering her clear gaze, she saw that the Mazda was indeed pulling up directly below her. She did not want to be caught like this – naked, tellingly smudged – so she turned quickly, and without another glance at the paper man ran back down the stairs to the kitchen door. Listening for their footsteps, she hurried through the rooms, collecting what was hers:

*Tiger T-shirt, running shoes. Pair of jeans.*

*Wallet, containing ID book, passport, and fifty bucks from Alan's stash.*

*Purple towel.*

All the rest she would leave behind: the clothes of ancient black and newer blue; the mirrors; the photographs. Even, after a hesitation, the beloved camera.

*Enough, enough. No more pictures.*

At the front door she knelt to tie her shoelaces; and all at once she could hear them clattering up the fire-escape, loud as soldiers. She crouched, head up, alert. And then they were in through the back door, loud in the echoing kitchen. Anna soundlessly knotted the lace and stood, curling a finger around the door handle as if around the trigger of a gun she held behind her back. Now they had seen the empty lounge, the missing pictures: agitated voices, his deep, hers high, neither speaking words that she could understand. Then Alan came through the archway into the passage, and she froze – *a tree, a stone*; but he only glanced into the open bedrooms, not seeing her where she stood at the door with the towel around her neck. He turned and called to the still invisible Leah:

“At work already, I guess.”

He stood now in the archway, his back to Anna, hand shoved into his jeans pocket, head slightly bowed. *Ah, the nape of that neck*, she remembered...but she had lost any impulse towards him. He was gone now, blank. If she went and touched him, she knew his body would feel inert: a styrofoam shape covered in dead skin.

Then Leah stepped back, out from behind Alan's greater bulk, in one movement placing her hand on the small of his back under the T-shirt. Much as Anna would have done. He arched his spine slightly at her touch, but did not turn; they still had not seen her. *So*, Anna observed with detachment: *her hand fits there, as mine did*. Behind her back, she pressed the door-handle down with the faintest of creaks, no louder than the distant surf.

Leah looked up. She had taken her contacts out, revealing eyes of naked hazel. They held no clear expression, but her jaw dropped slightly as if in surprise. There was moment of stillness, a moment in which Anna noticed small things: there was sand on Leah's bare feet, as if she had just walked in off the beach. A strand of long hair from her temple was caught in the corner of her mouth, like a thin crack across her face; Anna was moved by a strange tender impulse to brush it away.

Instead she placed a finger on her lips. Half-smiling, holding Leah's gaze, she pushed the door open and stepped backwards onto the landing. Leah frowned, and her fingers tensed into a fist against Alan's back, bunching the T-shirt. As he started to turn around, Anna shut the door between them. Gently, almost without sound, but firmly; like closing the cover of a long book she would never read again.

Leaving the building, she felt the bleak excitement of an astronaut bailing out – opening the airlock, stepping into the void, abandoning the craft and everything in it.

The contents of the flat spun away from her like so much space junk, glittering with the dust of broken mirror glass.

■ ■ ■

She had walked a block before she dared a look back: nobody in pursuit. The sunlight was pale but friendly; she breathed it in carefully, like some new kind of air. She felt jittery, startled, hopeful.

Instinctively she had fled uphill, towards the mountain; but now she turned to face the sea. It did not seem wet, or deep; it shimmered like fragments of peacock feather or insect wing, like something she could reach out and touch with a finger.

*Sink or swim, swim or sink.*

Starting towards it, she began to see things in the water: shadows moving slow and fast, winged, finned, silver and blue; shapes familiar and strange as dreams. And then she was running, the gradient tumbling her downhill faster and faster, flying; down to the sea, the city, the glittering day.

Back into the ceaseless motion of the world.